

# THE LEADER LETTER

Leading with *STRENGTH*

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## SEPTEMBER 2013, ISSUE 126

September heralds "Back to School" for many students and parents. This is also a great time of year for leaders and leadership teams to refocus on learning and development. **Exceptional leaders are lifelong learners on a journey of continuous personal development.** Extraordinary leaders see learning as a way of life not a phase of life.

In this issue you'll find timely advice based on **talent management and leadership development** from Kevin Wilde, Vice President of Organization Effectiveness and Chief Learning Officer at General Mills. Whether personal, team, or organization development, we need to make time for work that matters - - another article in this issue. It's way too easy to get sucked back into the busyness vortex as we head into September.

**Are you being seduced by the dark side of weakness-based improvement?** Like many deeply ingrained habits we often don't recognize how strongly we equate improvement with addressing gaps and deficiencies. Yet the legacy of Apple founder, Steve Jobs, shows how towering strengths can overshadow weaknesses. We'll also see how **Asset-Based Community Development** provides another example of, and powerful pathway to, strengths-based leadership development.

**Are you focused on your overall customers' experience** with your organization or mainly looking at departmental transaction? **Is your**

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- Nov 7 - Free Executive Briefing:** Developing Extraordinary Coaches & Leaders
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**leadership team living and leading your brand internally** to deliver on your external brand promise? These are a few key issues addressed in new research on "The Truth About Customer Experience" and in strengthening leaders to live the brand at Gap. These could be key questions to ask your leadership team in harnessing the power of an offsite retreat. As many organizations set budgets and plan for 2014 **this is a great time of year to refocus and reset your leadership and culture development priorities.**

To help with your personal, team, or organization development we're planning a complimentary webinar on October 8 on [11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches](#), a complimentary executive briefing in Toronto on November 7 on [Developing Exceptional Leaders and Coaches](#), and [Extraordinary Leader and Extraordinary Coach workshops in Toronto and Calgary](#).

**Extraordinary leaders don't build peak performance teams or organizations by treating learning as an inoculation -- a few shots and you're set for life.** As American president, John F. Kennedy observed, "leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

## HARNESSING THE POWER OF AN OFFSITE RETREAT

**Time away from daily operations in a management team retreat is critical to "sharpening the axe."** Having seen the powerful R & R (revitalization and renewal) emerge from dozens of offsite retreats we've facilitated over the decades, I used to be baffled by the fact that so many management teams don't do them. **It's now clear that most teams feel they can't afford the time.** They've fallen headlong into allowing their urgent operational issues to crowd out strategic effectiveness (see "[The Acceleration Trap: Frantic Busyness and Priority Overload is Overwhelming Way Too Many Teams and Organizations](#)").



Effective offsite retreats are customized to an organization's culture, team dynamics, development needs, strategic issues, and priorities. **Clearly identifying the retreat's objectives is a critical starting point.** Here's a recent example:

#### Retreat Objectives:

- Agree on the critical role of leadership and culture in boosting organizational performance
- Assess our current culture
- Define and assess our balance of processes/systems and people/leadership

- Outline the leadership behaviors that will move us beyond bolt-on development programs to built-in culture integration
- Leverage a strengths-based approach for our leadership and culture development
- Align visions of the desired culture for each business unit
- Assess the Strengths and Shifts needed in each business unit to reach their desired culture
- Clarify core Strategic Imperatives and implementation steps for each business unit to reach their desired culture

This example shows an executive team that isn't doing any "Moose Hunting." Often identifying and addressing moose-on-the-table (sometimes called elephants-in-the-room or 800 pound gorillas) is a vital element of a retreat. [Take our moose quiz](#) to see if you might have a few of these creatures lurking in your halls or meeting rooms.

What's key to effective Moose Hunting is providing a safe environment for identifying and rating the key issues. If that's done successfully, discussions on how to "reduce the moose" are more likely to be open enough to start getting at the heart of the issue. Having a neutral outsider facilitating this discussion can avoid the "No moose here, boss!" response that can make the problem even worse.

**Pre-retreat assessments** can be quite useful to sharply focus discussions, save time in cutting to the heart of issues and opportunities, identify moose issues, and/or use data to clarify team strengthening opportunities. Here are examples of what's sometimes uncovered, or you might use in putting your retreat agenda together:

- "[Executive Team Traps: Have You Fallen and Can't Get Up?](#)"
- "[Executive Team Traps: Tips, Techniques, and Resources to Pick Yourself Up](#)"
- "[A 14-Point Team Check Up](#)"
- "[The 7 Sins of Learning Impaired Management Teams](#)"

Sometimes team retreats focus on a particular issue such as **improving safety, service/quality improvement, leadership development, or culture development**. You can explore examples at "[Leading a Peak Performance Culture](#)", "[Links for Digging Deeper Into Leading a Peak Performance Culture](#)", and "[Leadership and Culture Development for Higher Health and Safety](#)".

When a management team has set improvement objectives and outlined an implementation plan **it's often very useful to explore the depth of true commitment to the change**. That means going beyond lip service to active and involved leadership. Leadership behaviors need to be specifically identified, expectations set, and development plans set to cascade from the management team throughout the organization. See "[Lasting Culture Change Means Going Beyond Passionate Lip Service to Involved Leadership](#)" for the Commitment Continuum model we've found very helpful in doing that.

I was just reading "[Benefits of an Offsite](#)" by Spencer Rascoff, the CEO of Zillow as I've been preparing to facilitate executive team retreats this fall. Spencer declares, "*I think one overnight annually is the minimum a company should do; I can definitely see the case for more often than that.*"

Our generic framework with a wide variety of approaches and options is outlined at [Management Team Retreats](#). **Time and again we've seen an offsite retreat makes a huge impact on team and organization effectiveness.** As Spencer Rascoff concludes; "*I'm a big believer in the benefits of an offsite. If done right, they are a great use of time and company resources. They can invigorate and inspire the leadership team and can pay dividends for many years to come.*"

## FOCUS ON OVERALL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Many attempts to improve customer service are variations of "the operation was a success but the patient died." Customer service improvements and measurements often focus on a narrow set of customer interactions or a few steps in the service process. **What's missing is understanding and improving the customer's entire experience.**



"The Truth About Customer Experience" in the September issue of *Harvard Business Review* provides recent research and examples. The authors show that **organizations who move beyond focusing mainly on "touchpoints" to "the customer's end-to-end journey" have 30 - 40% higher customer satisfaction and higher revenues, repeat business, positive word-of-mouth, and higher customer retention.**

The article is structured around **4 steps they've found top organizations use** to improve the customer journey:

1. **Identify the journeys in which they need to excel**
2. **Understand how they are currently performing in each**
3. **Build cross-functional processes to redesign and support those journeys**
4. **Institute cultural change and continuous improvement to sustain the initiatives at scale**

The article concludes with this key point:

"Optimizing a single customer journey is tactical; shifting organizational processes, culture, and mind-sets to a journey orientation is strategic and transformational ... engages the organization across functions and from top to bottom,

generating excitement, innovation, and a focus on continuous improvement. It creates a culture that's hard to build otherwise, and a true competitive advantage goes to companies that get it right."

This aligns with our experience around "[Leading a Customer-Centered Organization](#)". If improving customer service is a key focus for your team or organization click on "[The Three Rings of Perceived Value: An Integrated Customer Focus](#)" for an overview of a model used by dozens of leading organizations. There you'll also find a "**Quickie Service/Quality Quiz**" that provides 4 core questions to start mapping your customer's overall experience.

For a 4-part series on The Three Rings model, how American Express transformed their leadership and culture, and related approaches, click on [Customer Service blogs](#). You'll also find a series of excerpts and articles on this topic at [Customer Service articles](#).

## DANCING WITH THE TALENT STARS: 25 MOVES THAT MATTER NOW

Kevin Wilde is Vice President of Organization Effectiveness and Chief Learning Officer at General Mills. Since joining in 1998, the company's been consistently recognized for its innovative development work, highlighted by *Fortune's* #2 ranking as one of the best companies in the world at leadership development, *Leadership Excellence* magazine ranking at #1, and *Training* magazine's designation as a 'hall of fame' inductee as a top company for employee development. In 2007, *Chief Learning Officer* magazine selected Kevin as CLO of the year.



Before joining General Mills, Wilde spent 17 years at General Electric in a variety of human resources positions in the healthcare and capital divisions, as well as corporate assignments at GE's renowned Crotonville management development center.

Kevin delivered the opening keynote a few weeks ago at Zenger Folkman's Leadership Summit in Park City, Utah. He inspired us with key learning and research from General Mills' decade of leadership development work with Zenger Folkman. Kevin mentioned that he asked Joe Folkman to do a study of ZF's *Extraordinary Leader* database for them focused on key competencies for Human Resource leaders. As you'd hope, Interpersonal or people skills were the strongest areas. However, Drive for Results and Strategic Perspective were often low and even in fatal flaw territory for too many HR leaders.

We all received a copy of Kevin's succinct and practical book, [Dancing](#)

[with the Talent Stars: 25 Moves That Matter Now](#). The book is divided into four parts; Talent Management, Learning Strategies, Executive Development, and HR Excellence. Kevin condenses his extensive experience and shows how he built such a strong track record in producing results with a strategic HR perspective. [Dancing with the Talent Stars](#) provides 25 chapters of bite-sized executive summaries that can be easily read in any order.

Kevin's book is filled with many how-to steps, checklists, and bulleted idea menus. Here's his "High-Five List to build star quality talent in an organization:"

1. **Sponsors who matter** - "identify the pro-talent members of the line management staff and cultivate strong relationships"
2. **A strategic forum to talk talent** - "The aim is to create a strong process that integrates business planning routines with a respected and impactful practice. These sessions have three tangible outcomes:
  1. Firmly link the business plans with the human capital capabilities necessary
  2. Judge the health of the talent pipeline
  3. Accelerate the development of potential star talent"
3. **160-proof rum and shark repellent** - "resiliency is a prime characteristic of any successful talent champion."
4. **Strong external network and partners** - "I've often leveraged the strong and credible voice of outside experts to help influence line managers or existing HR leaders."
5. **Performance management systems that align** - "introduction of a new leadership competency model for training does limited good unless the staffing, measurement and reward systems are also adjusted to the new thinking."

Kevin has playfully formatted his leadership development digest with dance metaphors often starting each chapter and summarizing with Next Steps and Your Next Move. Dance through his handy playbook to align your leadership stars and make your move to higher performance!

**Mark your calendars** - The dates for next year's Leadership Summit in Utah are July 29 - 31, 2014

## THOUGHTS THAT MAKE YOU GO HMMM ON ... DANCING WITH THE TALENT STARS

A few thought-provoking insights from Kevin Wilde's leadership development book, [\*Dancing with the Talent Stars: 25 Moves That Matter Now\*](#):



"Strong learning practices make the difference. Smart organizations invest consistently in learning, master the essential moves, ensure that what is taught transfers and use partners well for superior performance."

"At the onset of a career, technical skills matter more than managerial or strategic leadership. Becoming an executive shifts the order of importance ... moving from manager to executive requires new skills. Most new executives think they have arrived and no longer need to keep up a rigorous personal learning agenda. Further, they often become deaf to negative feedback. If that happens, sooner or later the derailment bullets start flying."

"Only about a third of leaders need to focus on the negative or "developmental opportunities" found in a (360 assessment) report. Most of us obsess about any feedback as threatening criticism ... most would benefit by looking for good, relevant behaviors to strengthen. Good 360 practices reinforce that approach and provide useful tools and support to easily translate strength building to practical actions."

"One of the most significant contributions we (HR and development professionals) can make to an organization is to remove barriers. Every program and learning event can either reinforce existing boundaries or chip away at the walls inside an enterprise ... it all starts with re-examining your role as bridge builder in your organization."

"There is a science to great HR, and we diminish our professional standing by over-customization. Do responsible finance professionals let line leaders create their own accounting standards? The application of a standard process eliminates waste and maximizes effectiveness."

"Half of the time and resources to any new practice, such as a new leadership model or assessment tool, should be devoted to communication and capability training as the program is launched."

## DON'T BE SEDUCED BY THE DARK SIDE

Recently I had a coaching session with an operations vice president to review her personal development plan, following her participation in our *Extraordinary Leader* workshop. In that session she received feedback from 19 peers, direct reports, and others throughout her organization.



Joanne rated herself very low on *Builds Relationships* and *Collaboration and Teamwork* competencies. Everyone else gave her lower scores on these two of sixteen competencies, but nowhere close to her own very negative view of her skills in these two areas. 19 people who worked very closely with her and experienced her daily leadership did not identify these as serious enough to be "fatal flaws" for her.

Joanne and her raters agreed that her greatest strength was *Drives for Results* followed closely by *Takes Initiative*. One of the workshop exercises Joanne went through was aligning her strengths with her passion and what she and her raters determined were the organizational needs for her role. *Drives for Results* was the only one of the sixteen competencies where all three aligned.

Our research clearly shows that focusing personal development on this type of alignment is 2-3 times more effective than fixing weaknesses. Despite this evidence, Joanne could not resist the pull of focusing on improving her weaker areas. **She was seduced by the dark side of weakness-based improvement.**

At best, Joanne might raise her weaker areas from low to a bit higher. As was evident from her lack of progress since the workshop, her weakness-based improvement plan will likely stay in her workshop manual in her desk drawer.

In his latest *Forbes* column, "[What Can Increased Strengths Do For Your Career? Take The Test](#)", Joe Folkman reports on the research he and Jack Zenger did to understand good and great leaders; "It was not the absence of weaknesses that made these leaders great, but rather it was the presence of a few profound strengths." In this column Joe defines a leadership "strength," explains how strengths overshadow weaknesses, and provides a link to Zenger Folkman's *Extraordinary Leader* assessment.

**Gap and training needs analysis, performance appraisals, and traditional 360 feedback assessments are common paths to the dark side.** Don't be seduced to focus on weaknesses. **Use "The Force" of strengths to boost leadership effectiveness from good to great!**

***Further Reading:***



- "[Leadership Sweet Spot: Strengths, Passion, and Organizational Needs](#)"
- "[Is Your Culture Anchored in Strengths or Weaknesses?](#)"
- "[Peter Drucker on Making Strengths Productive](#)"
- "[The Enduring Impact of Focusing on Strengths](#)"
- "[Positive Psychology, Strengths, and Leadership](#)"

We've just set our fall public workshop schedule for *The Extraordinary Leader* and *The Extraordinary Coach*. [Click here](#) for more information.

## ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS PART OF EMERGING STRENGTHS-BASED MOVEMENT

I had lunch recently with Derek Alton to discuss his new role as Campaign Animator at the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement. Derek is a sharp, creative, and ambitious young innovator who is very driven to fulfill Tamarack's mission of **"collaboratively creating vibrant communities by engaging learning leaders."**



I've stayed in touch with Tamarack's co-founding president, and high energy driving force, Paul Born, over the years. Now 12 years old, Tamarack is "a charity that develops and supports learning communities to help people collaborate and to co-generate knowledge that solves complex community challenges. Our deep hope is to end poverty in Canada."

Paul is an inspiring "social entrepreneur" who's written books, developed workshops, provided facilitation and coaching, and built an impressive organization and extensive network aimed at "creating vibrant communities by building community, leading collaboratively, and reducing poverty."

During my lunch with Derek we discussed the convergence of strengths-based leadership, positive psychology, and appreciative inquiry, with **Asset-Based Community Development**. I wasn't familiar with ABCD and learned that this approach "is based on the belief that **communities have skills, networks, resources, and energy that can be used to tackle local problems and improve the community's quality of life**. In turn, it strengthens the effectiveness of people and organizations working to find solutions to problems within the community ... a positive approach to a problem is more likely to yield positive results."

[Click here](#) to learn more about Tamarack and their community-based strategies for asset building using a 5 step approach. This paragraph

especially leapt from their web page:

"Historically, efforts to revitalize communities have operated from a deficit perspective, which means that they begin by defining the deficiencies and needs of the neighborhood. Instead, asset-building looks at what currently works and is valuable within a neighborhood. This approach believes that the 'glass is half full,' as well as that even in the poorest of neighborhoods there exists a pool of assets (skills, resources, businesses and institutions) that can be better linked and maximized to create a more effective local economy."

ABCD is yet another example of the burgeoning and rapidly growing movement toward building on strengths. Moving from the deeply entrenched weakness or gap-based approach is countercultural and revolutionary. **But the research is clearly showing a strengths, asset, or positive development approach is much more energizing and 2 to 3 times more effective.**

#### ***Further Reading:***

- "[Leadership Sweet Spot: Strengths, Passion, and Organizational Needs](#)"
- "[The Best Positivity/Negativity Ratio for Peak Performance](#)"
- "[Positive Psychology, Strengths, and Leadership](#)"
- "[Peter Drucker on Making Strengths Productive](#)"
- "[Is Your Culture Anchored in Strengths or Weaknesses?](#)"
- "Developing Strengths or Weaknesses" white paper by Jack Zenger available at [Leadership Resource Center](#)

## **5 STEPS TO MAKING TIME FOR THE WORK THAT MATTERS**

Are you frustrated and overwhelmed by a flood of e-mails, meetings, and endless administrative tasks? **Does it feel like the harder you work, the less you accomplish?**

In their article, "Make Time for the Work that Matters," in the September issue of *Harvard Business Review*, London Business School professor Julian Birkinshaw and productivity consultant Jordan Cohen report on their three year study on increasing knowledge workers productivity. They found that "knowledge workers spend a great deal of their time -- an average of 41% -- on discretionary activities that offer little personal satisfaction and could be handled competently by others." **That's a lot of frustration and lost time!**



Using this variation of the Stop/Start/Continue approach, study participants "**cut desk work by an average of six hours a week and meeting time by an average of two hours a week:**"

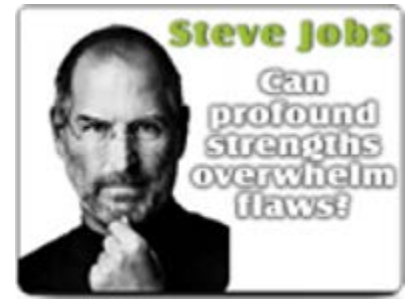
- **Identify Low-Value Tasks** - try to find up to 10 hours per week by stepping back to identify the proverbial low hanging fruit in your daily activities that aren't that important and/or could be dropped, delegated, or outsourced.
- **Decide Whether to Drop, Delegate, or Redesign** - sort your low-value tasks by "*quick kills* (things you can stop doing now with no negative effects), *off-load opportunities* (tasks that can be delegated with minimal effort), and *long-term redesign* (work that needs to be restructured or overhauled)."
- **Off-Load Tasks** - study participants were able to delegate from 2 to 20% of their work with no decline in their own or their team's productivity.
- **Allocate Freed-Up Time** - be strategic and thoughtful about where you'll reinvest the time you've saved. More time with Clients, coaching, or focusing on broader issues will provide higher satisfaction and returns.
- **Commit to Your Plan** - the more you involve people like your boss, colleagues, mentors, or team members in your development plan the less likely you are to slide back into old habits.

After reading my July blog, "[Are You Staying Sharp, Focused, and Productive](#)", peak performance coach, Ray Perras, added this timely comment: "I coach executives and find that most of the time, they take pride in being able to multi-task. I keep telling them that that is humanly impossible. We need to focus on one thing at a time to be effective. I like the expression 'taking a step back to take a step forward.' Unfortunately, too many think that they don't have time to step back and sharpen the axe. A lot of energy is spent repeating the same mistake because there is seldom introspection and self-evaluation which result from stepping back."

How sharp is your axe? **Are you making time for the work that matters?**

## **STEVE JOBS SHOWED HOW TOWERING STRENGTHS OVERSHADOW WEAKNESSES**

The summer release of "Jobs" the biographical drama film starring Ashton Kutcher as Steve Jobs shows our continuing interest in this extraordinary leader. Jobs disrupted and redefined the music, smart phone, computer, and related industries.



Jobs' large legacy resulted from a few outstanding strengths that many called genius. The new film, previous books, and articles have also documented a darker side or the weaknesses of this remarkable leader. He's an exceptional example of what our research clearly shows: **profound strengths can neutralize and overshadow a leader's weaknesses.**

This has deep and revolutionary implications for developing leadership skills. Typically leadership development, performance management, and other approaches to improvement are built around fixing weaknesses. Our research shows that building leadership strengths:

- Is the only way to move leadership skills from good to great.
- Produces up to three times higher change and improvement.
- Propels dramatically higher profits, sales, engagement, morale, energy levels, turnover, health and safety, and customer satisfaction.
- Broadens the spectrum of development methods with cross-training and competency companions.
- Boosts participant motivation to improve by 2 – 3 times.
- Energizes and makes organizational culture much more positive.
- It's a lot more fun to work on strengths!

In his recent *Forbes* column, [The Big Lessons About Leadership From Steve Jobs](#), Jack Zenger explains:

"The research is clear, however, the most effective leaders are not the ones without flaws, nor are they above average on every leadership competency. Neither of those paths leads to great leadership. The winning ticket: Like Jobs, you must possess 3-5 competencies in which you excel."

Last month Zenger Folkman rebroadcast their webinar [The Fascinating Case of Steve Jobs — Can Profound Strengths Overwhelm Flaws?](#) Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman delved into the history of Steve Jobs' and Apple's success. They discussed:

- What happens to the very small number of successful leaders with strengths but also fatal flaws
- What we know about Steve Jobs' strengths and flaws
- What might have happened had Jobs been open to feedback
- What positive aspects, if any, were caused by his negative behavior

- Research that shows most leaders are blind about their own strengths and weaknesses

[Click here to access](#) this complimentary webinar.

## TWEET READING: RECOMMENDED ONLINE RESOURCES

This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure.



My original tweet commenting on the article precedes each title and descriptor from the original source:

**Some of these steps are overly extreme but the messages around running more focused meetings are key to peak performance.**

["Cut Your Meeting Time by 90%"](#) - Fred Kofman, Executive Coach, Philosopher, Author of "Conscious Business" in LinkedIn

*"Most advice on meetings focuses on the 'how.' But the effort to improve meetings must start with the 'what.'"*

**Very useful strategies for taming The Email Beast!**

["7 Ways to Manage Email So It Doesn't Manage You"](#) - Jeff Weiner, CEO at LinkedIn

*"My inbox has essentially become the central hub of my workflow ... I've developed several practical guidelines that have enabled me to manage my inbox effectively and ensure it's not managing me."*

**Self-assessments are only half as accurate as 360 feedback but introspection and building a personal development plan is great start.**

["The Eight-Minute Test That Can Reveal Your Effectiveness as a Leader"](#), Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman  
[blogs.hbr.org](http://blogs.hbr.org)

*"We've developed an abbreviated self-assessment which you can take here. That will give you some sense of what your leadership skills may be and how they compare to others, right now."*

## A fascinating study showing how The E-Mail Beast is created -- and tamed -- by executive leadership.

"[To Reduce E-mail, Start at the Top](#)" - Chris Brown, Andrew Killick, and Karen Renaud , *Harvard Business Review*  
[blogs.hbr.org](http://blogs.hbr.org)

"Within three months the team's total e-mail output dropped by 54%. The output of the employees soon began decreasing too, even though those employees received no training or feedback. In fact, this drop was even greater -- 64%."

### READ THE LEADER LETTER IN TWICE WEEKLY INSTALLMENTS

The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my twice weekly [blog](#) during the previous month.



If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published **over twelve months you'll have read the equivalent of one of my books**. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

### FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW-UP

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at [Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net) or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [FaceBook](#), or my [blog](#)!

May the Force (of strengths) be with you!

Jim





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