MIDDLE LEADERS' LEARNING IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of middle leadership as experienced in a university context and specifically, directs attention to the significance of learning as a central facet of leadership development. Drawing on the reflections of two of the authors as new middle leaders (chairpersons of departments), the paper critically examines how middle leaders learn or come to know aspects of their role, and the learning opportunities and challenges associated with their middle leadership position. Two tenets underpin our analysis: learning is fundamentally a social process – we learn with and from others; and learning is relational – what, and how we learn is determined to some extent by others and affects others. As middle leaders, learning involves those above us (our leaders/line managers), those alongside us (our colleagues/middle leaders of other departments), and those below us (those whom we lead/line manage). The paper arises from a research project that has facilitated professional learning conversations between the three authors and supported us in adopting a relational perspective in our exploration of our experiences as middle leaders. This perspective has allowed us to examine the learning constraints and affordances arising as a result of others above us organising events, creating practices and constructing artefacts for us. It has helped us to consider how we can work collectively with our colleagues to renegotiate events, practices and artefacts; and it has suggested ways in which we can create better learning opportunities for those we lead. Finally, it has led us to identify ways in which the learning opportunities for middle leaders may be enhanced within the university sector.

Introduction

Middle leadership positions in higher education, and universities specifically, encompass heads or chairpersons of departments (CoDs), heads of schools, faculties and other academic organising units. Those who take up these positions can be thought of as "manager-academics" (Deem, 1998; Deem & Brehony, 2005), or "leader-academics" (Inman, 2009). Many universities, particularly those in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, continue the practice of selecting these middle leaders from within the ranks of their contemporaries, and framing the position as one that is temporary and rotational (Smith, 2007). Manager-academics return usually after a period of a few years to join their colleagues becoming, once again, academics. The period of time is often seen as one divorced from the trajectory of their usual academic lives, a duty to be fulfilled. As we discuss below, this research has sought to critically engage with the distinction in exploring middle leadership as experienced and enacted by academics who perceive the role and work of leadership as integral to and embedded in their work and ongoing career development as academics.

The structural position of the middle leader in the university

The tendency for a distinction to be made in middle leaders' roles and identities is reflected in Bennett et al.'s (2007) identification of two key tensions in the role of middle leaders. First, there is tension associated with the expectation that they retain loyalty to both the whole-of-faculty as well as to their particular department or area of responsibility. Secondly, they are caught between a university culture of line management within a hierarchical framework and the professional need for cooperation and collegiality within their department or area of responsibility. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lapp and Carr (2006) identify middle leaders as being synchronistically both *master* and *slave* as they enact the complex roles of being a subordinate, an equal and a superior.

The middle leader is set apart structurally from their academic colleagues, and their position is defined in relation to those above them and below them. In our context, the statement of position purpose for a chairperson is framed primarily in terms of responsibility and accountability to the those above; "the Chairperson is responsible to the Vice-Chancellor through the Dean for the leadership and management of the academic and administrative affairs of the department" (The CoD position description). Reinforcing this is the rider that it is a position that "may be terminated early . . . by decision of the relevant Dean." The authority that a Chairperson has in this position is thus framed in terms of that which is delegated from the Dean, the Vice-Chancellor, and overarching University Committees, in our case Academic Board and Council. This structure of authority, as codified in the university position description, constructs the Chairperson as someone who puts policies, determined by those above, into place within departments below.

Middle leaders in universities are, however, also typically identified as having a responsibility for leading learning; to have a learning agenda for their department and their staff, or those below them. Tasks such as undertaking performance reviews with staff to recognise past achievements and to plan future directions, and responsibility to recognise and provide for learning and professional development needs from staff, reflect this aspect of middle leadership. It is represented in the authors' CoD position description as "assist[ing], encourag[ing], and, when appropriate, direct[ing] staff to take up opportunities for training and development, including the upgrading of specific skills" (The CoD position description).

Further, it is critical to acknowledge that the position and role of middle leaders presents a need for and expectation of learning on the part of individuals coming into the position/role. Becoming a middle leader prompts engagement with and development of new knowledge, skills and perhaps also dispositions. It appears that to date little research has explored the learning of novices to middle leadership. As Inman states, "What has been written tends to focus on what [middle] leaders do, rather than why they have become leaders and how they have learnt to lead" (Inman, 2009, p. 418).

There is, nevertheless, a significant body of literature exploring the concept of organisational learning. In recent years this has taken a shift from systems thinking to relational learning, and the creation of a culture of learning built on relationships has gained prominence (Senge et al., 2007). From this perspective, leading a learning organisation or part of an organisation is about building relationships so as

to create a deeper sense of connection whereby the person not only has a clearer appreciation of their organisational reality but also a stronger sense of their part in how it functions. As we discuss below, this research served to particularly enhance awareness and understanding of the positioning of middle leaders within the university as a learning organisation.

The present study

The present study arose in the context of the first two authors becoming new chairpersons of departments in the faculty at the same time. We sought to theorise our practice as a way of understanding the often personally and deeply felt frustrations, and challenges that our new positions brought; but also the sometimes experienced, sense of achievement and even joy. We also sought to more deeply understand our role and responsibilities, and the limits of our agency in the organisation. To this end, we worked with the third author, to articulate our responses to contemporary leadership theory, to share our experiences and to re-frame them in a way that better represented constraints and affordances associated with our position and the multiple roles associated with it.

Taking the view that middle leadership is fundamentally relational has allowed us to indeed re-frame our experiences, to appreciate the inherently social nature of leadership, to recognise power relations amidst that, and to consider the opportunities for agency within structures, processes and hierarchies that feature in our work as middle leaders. Previously we have discussed our conceptualisation of middle leadership as relational, highlighting the discursive events, practices, and artefacts of our context which these both reflect relations and are constituted by relations (Branson, Penney & Franken, in press). In this paper, we specifically consider how learning was experienced, how it was constrained and enabled by discursive events and practices, and how it was both represented and mediated through codified artefacts.

Our aim in this paper is thus to propose some responses to the following questions:
− How can we work collectively with our colleagues to renegotiate events, practices and artefacts?
− How can we create better learning opportunities for those we lead?
− How can learning opportunities for middle leaders be enhanced within the university sector?

In the section that follows we consider different conceptualisations of learning and learning relations pertinent to middle leadership. This provides a platform for then focusing on analysis of our own experiences of learning as middle leaders. This allows us to present and consider some responses to the key questions posed above.

Learning new knowledge and skills

A number of previous research studies have highlighted the fact that new middle leaders in higher education feel unprepared for their positions, and, focusing on formal learning, point to the fact that universities tend to provide little in the way of

training opportunities (Inman, 2009; Smith, 2007). Deem and Brehony's (2005) study for instance found that only one third of the manager academics interviewed had received any training. Like other areas of leadership study, research on leading in higher education, and specifically in middle leadership, has included concerns with documenting the types of knowledge needed such as self knowledge, people knowledge, knowledge of university structures and systems. (See for example Inman, 2009; Knight & Trowler, 2001). This paper focuses not on exploring or verifying the types of knowledge that middle leaders in university contexts need to have, but rather on the ways in which the middle leader comes to know or learn in a system of relations with others.

Knowledge transmission

Viewing learning from a relational perspective that focuses on hierarchical structure, assumes that chairpersons have much to learn from those above. This view is enacted through knowledge transmission practices and events - knowledge is seen to be held by individuals and to be passed on to individuals. Knowledge transmission focuses very much on a non-differentiated generic view of a learner and their uptake of a circumscribed body of knowledge. In knowledge transmission, knowledge itself is seen as bounded but not contextually situated, factual and somewhat static. Smith's (2007) interviewees reported topics such as "health and safety, equal opportunities or the university's administrative systems" as examples of such knowledge (Smith, 2007, p.6). This type of knowledge and the manner of its presentation represents an autonomous view of learning, where learning considerations are removed from context. As Bosua and Scheepers explain, "Knowledge detached from its context becomes meaningless" (2007, p.95).

Knowledge sharing

Learning is a fundamentally social process, a "collective participatory process of active knowledge construction emphasizing context, interaction, and situatedness" (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 2). Bosua and Scheepers (2007) in their work on *Knowledge Management* in complex organisations, distinguish between *knowledge transfer* and *knowledge sharing*. Knowledge transfer occurs when knowledge moves from one to another supported by a joint understanding of the context. Knowledge sharing is "a dual process of enquiring and contributing to knowledge through activities such as learning-by-observation, listening and asking, sharing ideas, giving advice, recognizing cues, and adopting patterns of behaviour . . . . [It] is both an individual and collective activity, involving explicit and tacit exchanges between people" (Bosua & Scheepers, 2007, p.95).

Knowledge sharing is a process captured in Lave and Wenger's (1991) familiar notion of communities of practice, and implicit in the their concept, *legitimate peripheral participation.* Legitimate peripheral participation is a relational model of learning that, if considered in the context of middle leaders in a university, would assume novice middle leaders are privy to the practices of more experienced middle leaders and to the artefacts of the community, and through increasing participation in those practices and use of the artefacts, become more expert themselves. Novice

middle leaders might expect to be mentored and provided with resources that are organised and presented in a way that is *tuned* to their needs. As Luckin comments, human and artefact resources must be "organized and activated appropriately" for effective learning to be supported (Luckin, 2008, p.451). Inman (2009, p.421) speaks of learning for chairpersons as needing to be "bespoke and contextualised."

A great deal of knowledge associated with the role of the middle leader is codified in multiple text forms - or "knowledge artefacts" (Bosua & Scheepers, 2007) including but not restricted to terms of reference for the position, policies and guidelines, meeting agendas; and is reified in discursive events such as meetings. Novice middle leaders might also expect knowledge artefacts and discursive events to be mediated by a more knowing middle leader.

Experiencing learning

This section presents our experiences of learning, recorded in the context of wider discussions with the third author on contemporary leadership theory, and our experiences in general as we enacted our role.

Knowledge transmission, knowledge artefacts and mediation

Both of the chairpersons experienced knowledge transmission. For instance, on a number of occasions, speakers - *experts* - were organised to speak on topics ranging from an explanation of the university's budgetary processes to an outline of the university and faculty's publicity activities. The former was a response to a request for support in helping us manage our departmental budgets and the latter was unsolicited by the chairpersons. Both were deemed to be knowledge that we needed and/or would find useful in our roles. If knowledge is transmitted to middle leaders when others deem it to be needed and in a form determined by others, it risks the possibility of being rejected, regarded as non-important, as it is not contextualised or tuned to personal need.

The two chairpersons succeeded previous chairpersons, with no official period of transition in which the novice could *shadow* the expert. The administrative assistant for both novice leaders became the temporary and unofficial mentor, particularly in matters administrative. Succession also was essentially represented as one requiring knowledge transmission. In both cases we received knowledge in the form of material artefacts - a CD of all department related files from the former chairperson's desktop in one case, and a pile of temporally organised files in another. In the view of the previous chairpersons, the material artefacts *handed down* seemingly represented what we needed to know.

The CD and the pile of temporally organised files potentially represented invaluable knowledge artefacts had they been more than meeting agendas, minutes, budget reports, etc, and had they been personally mediated. No helpful contextual information accompanied the physical handover of the CD, and thus what was contained in the computer files was not mediated in any way. In the case of the paper files, the handover was accompanied by little substantive mediation, but the novice chairperson did receive advice on how to act to effect a personal agenda. Much of the knowledge accumulated by the predecessors over their time as chairpersons remained tacit and disappeared as they vacated the position. One

chairperson commented,

> I'd say that a lot of the work is understanding systems, and I think if you inherit or you have a relationship with a previous chair where you don't need to put in all that thinking around systems that would release you a lot.

For both of the chairpersons in this study, neither codified knowledge sources (including those knowledge artefacts discussed above), nor discursive events were mediated by a more knowing other leader. Had meaningful mediation occurred for us, we might have said our experiences were ones of knowledge transfer. Had shared reflection and interaction occurred between previous and new chairpersons on how the departments might work more effectively both in terms of their own operation and for the faculty, we might have said our experiences were ones of knowledge sharing.

Our transition into the position of chairperson was not experienced as a shared and collective activity. In retrospect, we are aware that such transition could be facilitated within and supported by a strong community of fellow chairpersons. Arguably the absence of such an experience was because the chairpersons previously had not operated as a collective or community in Lave and Wenger's terms (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or more specifically a professional community of practice (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Neither was our learning experienced as "emphasizing context, interaction, and situatedness" (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 2).

An alternative community and space for learning

A sense of frustration and the experience of limited control over what, and how knowledge gaps were addressed, how learning was experienced and constrained by discursive practices led to a group of middle leaders (including but not limited to the two chairpersons in this study) establishing their own "information ground" (Fisher, Landry & Naumer, 2007; Pettigrew, 1999), in the form of *breakfast meetings*, which were held at a cafe some distance from the faculty but still on campus. The three factors that in concert determine an information ground are information, people and place. Information grounds are "synergistic environments temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information" (Pettigrew, 1999. p. 811). One of the middle leaders commented on these meetings:

> That's been really positive, that relationship building within as a group and to recognise we're all facing similar issues and that there is a lot that we can learn from each other and we can also be very supportive of each other.

The comments capture the dynamics of information grounds as expanded by Fisher, Landry and Naumer (2007) - that in an information ground, people may initially be motivated by the need for social engagement or mutual support, but that they come to experience significant information sharing, from which they can benefit "along physical, social, affective, and cognitive dimensions" (Fisher, Landry & Naumer, 2007). The following comments highlight how the information ground shifted to become much more strategic.

> But also increasingly, it's quite interesting, it's also shifted to how can we operate as a collective more strategically. Because I guess that we are seeing some things that we want to influence and don't feel that current structures and processes are enabling us to influence so we're actually being proactive in trying to create space

and opportunity and a mechanism to do that.

The professional learning community that grew in association with the information ground, appeared to be constituted because of the fact that a critical number of novice middle leaders with a similar ideological stance, values and motivations, were appointed at roughly the same time. The more senior management personnel constructed the positive relationship between the new middle leaders and their peers as one of mutual emotional support and friendship, and thus through this representation possibly limited its agency. While these are undoubtedly strong dynamics of our relationship, the potential of our professional learning community to contribute to knowledge generation in the faculty was perhaps its most powerful aspect.

Currently the group of chairpersons is striving to gain recognition as a collective, by clarifying its role and responsibilities and by codifying its authority and reporting lines though proposing a formal terms of reference for its constitution and its operation. However, there are ongoing feelings of constraint associated with others' apparent reluctance to recognise middle leaders as a knowledge resource. In this regard, during the period of our tenure as middle leaders, we recognise that we were *consulted* in the process of reviewing policies and guidelines and other codified text forms. The exercise of review was one of that often appeared as requiring minor change, and policies were seldom critically scrutinised and collectively reconstructed; and the assumptions underlining the policies and guidelines were seldom questioned. From our perspective this signified both a lack of commitment to knowledge change for the organisation, and a denial of the capacity of the chairpersons to collectively play an important role in organisational learning. This resulted in some frustration as seen in the comment below:

> Why not use people's strengths, we work collectively so actually we're putting away our personas as chairpersons but we're sitting down as people who have values and are committed and who are reasonably good, if not very good, strategic thinkers and why don't you utilise us better?

Learning for those we lead

Knowledge sharing was deemed critical in facilitating learning for those we lead. We worked to share the knowledge we had about the organisation with staff in our respective departments:

> I've tried to make all of the department far more aware of the many things coming across my desk, the many things raised at senior management, CoDs, and so on, and actually getting people far more engaged with the breadth of issues that you're trying to deal with on behalf of the department, and I think that's really important.

This related to knowledge that in our view was tuned to their need.

> Everybody has a right to know information that negatively and positively impacts on them, and underpinning that is the idea that actually there isn't a fair and the collective knowing things about knowing information, knowing about budgets, knowing about how much of an allowance a chairperson gets or so I think that whole thing about disclosure is really, really important for me, and so I do try to practise that and articulate decision making and when I have found information, both good and bad that might impact on people I work really hard at trying to share that responsibly with people.

If we accept that learning is a relational as well as a social process, then other

members of our departments can be are framed as resources for each other's learning. To this end, we aimed to encourage collaboration not competition, as explained below.

> My work with people leading up to and in relation to promotion applications; and also within that trying to very much foster a collaborative sort of atmosphere within the department. I was [saying] to people that you're not competing against each other in this promotion, if two of you are trying to go above the bar for senior lecturer, work together, sit down and share, and that's all been new and positive for people and that's been really great to see.

While research expertise is recognised by the faculty through the codification of research outputs, teaching and other forms of expertise are often not acknowledged or shared. We worked to create contexts in which expertise of this nature is shared amongst members of our departments. Practices in our departments with this aim included the nomination of those who had recently become expert in an administrative area such as student disciplinary processes for plagiarism, or take a lead role in extending departmental knowledge and understanding of assessment and moderation. This person, for the moment, became the *go-to person* for that particular process. This recognises the dynamic and situated aspect of expertise. Other practices that reflected a distributed expertise perspective included rotating chairing of meetings, and the devolving of sections of the larger department budget to particular groups.

Our commitment to knowledge sharing was also reflected in the way we organised departmental social practices such as departmental meetings. The two chairpersons in this study sought to use meetings primarily for discussion and debate for knowledge sharing and collective learning, rather than for transmitting knowledge that could otherwise be accessed by department staff through forums such as on-line repositories of policy documents. We experienced different degrees of success in this endeavour, with one finding that time constraints of meetings, limited opportunities for the whole department, and inter-personal relations amongst staff all presented challenges.

The practices that we tried to foster in supporting the learning of those we lead are premised on a belief and recognition that our learning must incorporate the knowing of others. Burns (2010) posits that it is critical that the leader not only takes the time to learn and appreciate what are the foremost important values, needs, motives and beliefs of those they are leading but, most significantly, that these are embedded in some tangible way into their leadership vision – and we would add, action. However, the reality is that managerial aspects of our position as CoDs have constrained our ability to foster learning for others:

> I came here very much wanting to play a lead role in terms of particularly leading research capability and capacity building and helping people shift in terms of their own profiles and us collectively shifting the profile and that's definitely been hindered by being in the COD role.

Learning outcomes as relational

Our tenure as chairpersons is a temporary one, a three-year period, after which we return to the ranks of our colleagues, to be lead by another. As indicated in our introductory comments, the tenure can be thought of as time apart from our work and development as academics; as a time of "managing oneself, one's job, and one's

continuing learning in a context of constrained time and sources, conflicting priorities, and complex inter- and intra-professional relationships" (Eraut, 2004, p.259). But what of the learning outcomes for us? Many of the comments we made are imbued with a consideration of relational outcomes. An example is as follows:

> I think really one of the huge gifts, benefits, good things about it is your relational expansion, actually, your world just expands and gives you a completely different, it shifts you into a completely different perspective. And I can remember feeling like that right at the beginning, it was a sort of slightly otherworldly, you know, it was almost a bodily experience, and I was thinking oh, I'm sitting here in front of the room and it just felt quite different.

In fact, knowledge of self, in concert with knowledge of others - the essence of what relational means, was deemed to be significant. When asked, "What sort of professional learning do you think would be of greater support to you in your role?", one of the middle leaders identified relational awareness.

> I think something where I learnt about how others might perceive my actions or how I'm perceived by others or how I threaten people. So you said that to me the other day, "Have you thought about what might be this person's reaction if you say this?" So I don't really do that and I think if I did that more systematically I might be more aware. That would be useful, I think.

Discussion and recommendations

Previously we have presented a view of middle leadership in the university context considering a number of relational dimensions including power relations, discursive relations (Branson, Penney & Franken, in press). This paper has focused on learning relations and is premised on the fact that we learn with and from others; and that what, and how we learn is determined to some extent by others and affects others.

This perspective has allowed us to see that learning (from both an individual and organisational perspective) is constrained when people, practices, and discursive events delimit what we can learn from others. These include practices that support knowledge transmission, that pay minimal attention to mediation of knowledge artefacts and discursive practices, and that fail to see all staff, not just CoDs, as contributors to knowledge generation, and new learning for the organisation. It has also allowed us to see how learning can be enabled when we take an "ecology of resources" perspective (Luckin, 2008; Westberry & Franken, 2013) which recognises that all participants in a community or a learning context can contribute to knowledge generation and have a perspective they can bring to bear on problems, issues and discussions.

Learning can be enabled through informal and self initiated groups and communities. The experience that afforded good learning for us was the information ground, the serendipitous problem-focused and outcomes-centred meetings and interactions were what provided us with situated and relevant knowledge to more successfully fulfill our roles effectively. Inman (2009) however cautions against informal learning of this nature being the only form of learning, and suggests that "learning from informal experience needs to be more conscious with time planned for critical reflection and discussion . . . [as] informal learning is likely to be unstructured, unclear and unplanned, and it is therefore doubtful how much development actually

takes place" (Inman, 2009, p. 425-426).

Novice middle leaders in universities which are learning institutions, and who themselves are teachers, may expect that they will be offered effective formal learning opportunities and that those learning opportunities follow principles of good learning and teaching practice. Our experiences suggest that the university offers few effective formal opportunities for significant learning. Our formal learning opportunities represent a form of *training,* a concept not dissociated from transmission and an autonomous view of learning (see Deem & Brehony, 2005; Inman, 2009; Smith, 2007). Inman (2009) presents a range of "development approaches": reading, modelling, observing, questioning, problem solving, counselling and coaching. Inman's model "builds on the perceived effectiveness of more experiential forms of professional development, which considers a leader's background and needs rather than providing a generic formal training solution" (Inman, 2009, p. 428).

Agyris and Schön (1978) make a distinction between learning contexts that ask for single loop thinking or those that involve double loop thinking. In the former, knowledge is not there to be contested but is information to be acted upon or implemented in a way that allows the organisation perhaps solve a problem, or respond to a challenge in an expedient way which allows the organisation to continue to function as it has done previously. In the latter, problems and challenges invoke the examination not only of possible responses and solutions but also the assumptions that underpin them. With respect to contributing to the learning of the organisation, professional learning communities are far more effective than individuals in bringing discrepancies, dissonance and critique in ways that can contribute to the double loop learning and thus the health of the organisation For middle leaders, professional learning communities are powerful ways of drawing on the expertise of each other to create new knowledge and to contest old ways of knowing. The middle leadership learners in learning relationships with each other in our work increasingly became aware of their collective potential, and acted collectively in their knowledge contributions.

One important consideration not discussed in the present paper is the wider context of education reform and change, which must be acknowledged. Contemporary universities are sites of change, a fact drawn to our attention by numerous writers at least two decades ago (see for example Buchbinder 1993; Pinto-Coelho & Carvalho, 2013). The contemporary context – the new managerialism, was well described by Deem in 1998 and still appears apposite today:

> The techniques highlighted by 'new managerialist' theorists include the use of internal cost centres, the fostering of competition between employees, the marketisation of public sector services and the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances. Other features include attempting to change the regimes and cultures of organisations and to alter the values of public sector employees to more closely resemble those found in the private 'for profit' sector.
>
> (Deem, 1998, p. 49-50).

The new managerialism plays an unequivocal role in framing the position of the middle leader, and the relations, that the middle leader has with those above, alongside and below her/him. However, Clegg and MacAuley report that academics in middle leadership positions construct themselves as leaders rather than

managers: "Heads of department and other middle academic managers frequently disassociate themselves from managerialist practices, which they identify only at the most senior levels, while they rely on consent and negotiation within the confines of mutually understood norms of collegiality" (Clegg & MacAuley, 2005, p.7-8).

Conclusion

In the time since taking up middle leadership roles, we have come to understand that what we need to know and learn is much more complex than what can be represented in the text forms we inherited or the presentations we were exposed to. Given this complexity, we feel it is essential that the university frames the middle leaders' period of time in the role as a time of learning and development, not just one of performing aspects of the position as prescribed in codified documents such a position descriptions. We also see it as critical that the university recognises the relational complexity inherent in the position. A relational analysis has allowed us to understand Deem discusses Newman's (1995) notion of a "transformative organisation" where "work is more team-based, hierarchies are flattened and considerable attention is paid to long-term goals and to the management of organisational cultures" (Deem, 1998, p. 50). This arguably could serve as the new middle leader's workplan, and thus also as the learning brief.

For a university to not only model its fundamental calling to promote learning but also to implement prudent strategic organisational practice, personal and organisational learning must surely be promoted as an unequivocal cultural norm.

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