

Leadership Theory Analysis: Adaptive Leadership

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### Leadership Theory Analysis: Adaptive Leadership

Management and organization consultants have long argued that the social and business environments continually present new challenges and opportunities. Vaill (1989) presented the imagery of a permanent white water environment, where the pace of change in organizations is aggressive and constant. These complex environments thrust individuals into situational challenges. Vaill suggested the only appropriate course of action is to never stop learning as an individual and organization (Vaill, 1989, 1996). Specific factors attributing to the complexity in twenty-first century businesses include:

...increased globalization and international commerce, rapid technological change, changing cultural values, a more diverse workforce, more use of outsourcing, new forms of social networking, increased use of visual interactions, more visibility of leader actions, and concerns for outcomes besides profits. (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010, p. 81)

Yukl and Mahsud (2010) contended that the need for adaptive leadership is becoming more important as the pace of change dramatically increases.

Within higher education, numerous issues drive the pace of change, including tuition, student debt, government funding, changing demands of consumers, and technological advances (Brewer & Tierney, 2012). Despite the general observation that institutions of higher education are slow to change and adopt new strategies, external factors have forced the industry to answer the call for more innovation. Brewer and Tierney (2012) suggested that institutions of higher education must adopt innovations to survive in this complex and turbulent environment.

Christenson and Eyring (2011), Selingo (2013), and Zemsky (2013) posited similar arguments, noting the increased demands on the higher education community. The capacity to respond to these looming challenges is dependent on the strength and adaptability of leaders. The purpose

of this research study is to evaluate the adaptive leadership theory within the context of complex challenges.

### **Overview of the Theory**

The adaptive leadership theory emerged in Heifetz's (1994) seminal book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Further development of the theory materialized mostly through the work of Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009b; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) as the group sought to recapitulate the role of the leader in change scenarios. Various sectors have applied the theory, including: business, health and human services, education, and religion (Heifetz et al., 2009b).

### **Complexity Leadership Theory**

Beyond Heifetz and his colleagues' contributions, Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) positioned the adaptive leadership theory as a subcategory under the complexity leadership theory (CLT). The CLT framework views leadership within the context of the twenty-first century organization, where "knowledge is a core commodity and the rapid production of knowledge and innovation is critical to organizational survival" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 299). Traditional, hierarchical forms of leadership address technical challenges through managerial functions, policies, and procedures; however, the challenges of this knowledge era require a leadership model that encourages learning, innovation, and flexibility (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Within the CLT, adaptive leadership reflects a collaborative change process that focuses on the cooperative efforts of individuals within an organization versus relying solely on a person to fulfill a managerial role (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

### **Nature of Adaptive Leadership**

In his seminal book, Heifetz (1994) called for a new form of leadership that promoted the adaptive capacities of people, versus addressing problems through hierarchical authority. The focus is on the leader's role to mobilize followers to "tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 14). The primary distinction of the theory, as compared to contemporary alternatives, is its emphasis on behaviors of adaptive leaders versus specific leadership traits or characteristics (Northouse, 2016). The behaviors of adaptive leaders should encourage followers to tackle and solve challenges through mobilization, motivation, organization, and focusing attention (Heifetz, 1994).

### **Technical versus Adaptive Challenges**

The adaptive leadership theory differentiates between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges generally require traditional forms of leadership, where problem identification and resolution flow through existing hierarchical systems, such policies, procedures, and managerial appointments (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009b; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In such challenges, people look to individuals possessing authority to address the problem versus engaging in a process of learning, innovation, and change (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Adaptive challenges become difficult to identify or resolve through the traditional leadership structure or organizational systems; rather, these challenges require leaders to encourage followers to tackle and solve the problem in a collaborative manner (Heifetz, 1994). Thus, the environment encourages exploration, innovation, and adaptation (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Day (2000) described this difference in management versus leadership training.

Management training focuses on proven strategies to address known issues; leadership training focuses on the importance of learning and adaptation of teams in unpredictable situations.

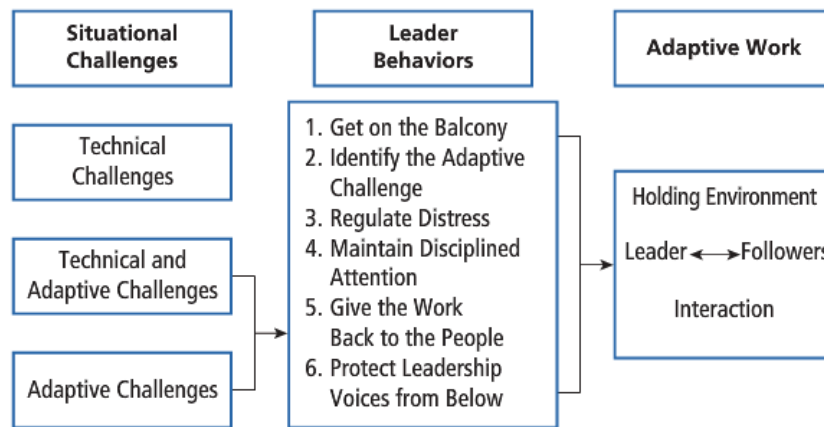
Heifetz et al. (2009b) identified four contexts to distinguish complex adaptive challenges from technical challenges. First, a gap may exist between expected values and behaviors. For example, a university that promotes financial stewardship but charges excessively high tuition rates does not model behaviors that match its value system. Second, individuals or organizations may experience competing commitments. For example, a university wants to provide a high quality, rigorous education, but at the same time utilizes a mostly itinerant faculty due to fiscal constraints.

Third, controversial or sensitive issues remain prevalent because people avoid articulating an opposing position. Speaking out on a particular “sacred cow” or “elephant in the room” becomes a personal risk. For example, a university president that responds in a reactive manner does not receive criticism from the cabinet out of fear of retaliation. Last, people may avoid work because the task moves outside of their comfort level. For example, an employee does not produce good work; instead of remediating the employee, the individual receives menial assignments. The supervisor should terminate the individual versus justifying the employee’s inadequacies. Although these contexts do not describe all possible scenarios, each archetype provides a model for identifying and responding to adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009b; Northouse, 2016).

### **Leadership Behaviors**

Based on the research of Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009b; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), Northouse (2016) presented a visual representation of the adaptive leadership model. As presented in Figure 1, adaptive leadership

involves three components: (a) the situational challenge, (b) the leader's behaviors, and (c) the adaptive work. As illustrated in Figure 1, the behaviors of adaptive leaders are general guides for helping followers tackle the challenge and resulting change. Despite the presence of an order, the following behaviors may overlap at any one time and should reflect the overall stance of the leader (Heifetz, 1994; Northouse, 2016).



*Figure 1.* Model of adaptive leadership. The above figure presents a visual representation of Heifetz's 1994 adaptive leadership model. The sections (e.g. situational challenges, leader behaviors, and adaptive work) represent the major components of the theory. Retrieved from "Model of Adaptive Leadership" by P. Northouse, 2016, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, p. 261. Copyright © 2016 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

**Get on the balcony.** The imagery of the balcony relates to the role of the leader in assessing the current situation by viewing patterns from a distance (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). The goal is to develop a perspective of the environment without engaging directly with the action (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Heifetz (1994) provided the contrasting imagery of observing a dance from the balcony versus the dance floor. Engagement on the dance floor makes it nearly impossible to develop an overall perspective as the environment captures the observer's attention. Conversely, the observer must physically stop moving and reposition at the balcony level to capture the patterns on the dance floor.

Within an organizational environment, the day-to-day operations can stymie the leader's ability to observe these details, thus the individual become a "prisoner of the system" (Heifetz &

Laurie, 1997, p. 126). This perspective is essential for the leader; otherwise, they will not mobilize the people toward adaptive work, which is a requirement for the other leadership behaviors (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

**Identify adaptive challenges.** From this broad perspective, the leader develops the capacity to differentiate between technical and adaptive challenges. One of the greatest errors of leadership is not properly diagnosing the challenge as technical versus adaptive, which results in the application of improper leadership (Northouse, 2016). (The distinction between technical and adaptive challenges received attention in a previous section of this study.)

Snowden and Boone (2007) proposed that leaders cannot immediately revert to traditional management styles, but they must allow for more experimentation. Moreover, leaders must allow patterns to emerge, which offers opportunities for “innovation, creativity, and new business models” (Snowden & Boone, 2007, p. 74). Snowden and Boone (2007) theorized that truly adaptive leaders properly identify the context and alter their activities to match the environment.

**Regulate distress.** Any adaptive challenge always necessitates the need for change, which can quickly overwhelm followers with its fast pace and high demands (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). While customary and even helpful in healthy amounts, this distress can challenge the social equilibrium within organizations (Heifetz, 1994). According to Heifetz and Laurie (1997), leaders operate on a razor’s edge between followers connecting emotionally with the change process and becoming overwhelmed by the process.

Therefore, it is the role of the leader to task followers with the adaptive challenge while regulating the levels of emotional and social volatility (Heifetz, 1994). The adaptive leadership model recommends three strategies that leaders can utilize to regulate distress: “(a) create a

holding environment; (b) provide direction, protection, orientation, conflict management, and productive norms; and (c) regulate personal distress” (Northouse, 2016, p. 266).

First, the holding environment refers to a safe zone where people can discuss the problems of a change process without avoiding the real issues (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Within this environment, whether physical or virtual, people begin to communicate, define and deliberate on the root issues, and acknowledge individual viewpoints and expectations (Heifetz, 1994). The concept of the holding environment connects to psychotherapy, which utilizes a therapeutic atmosphere and various communication techniques to nurture a safe setting for clients (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Within this environment and through ascribed authority, adaptive leaders serve as the catalyst and regulators for the dialogue process (Northouse, 2016). Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009a) poignantly refer to the leader’s activities as creating an atmosphere of courageous conversations.

Second, the leader provides “direction, orientation, conflict management, and productive norms” to regulate distress (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 127). Reflecting on Heifetz’s (1994) work, Northouse (2016) defined these prescriptive behaviors in the following manner. Direction relates to the leader’s role to provide a clear path for the change process, which lessens the stress of uncertainty. Protection is the task of managing the speed of change, whether too great or too hasty for followers. Orientation is aligning followers to the new roles and responsibilities that associate with a change. Conflict management is the healthy facilitation of interpersonal disagreements. Through this process, the leader acknowledges the importance of conflict as the “engine of creativity and learning” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 127). The formation of productive norms is the responsibility to establish rules of behavior that will guide the group’s activities (Northouse, 2016).



Last, the adaptive leader must not focus solely on the followers, but they must also regulate personal distress. In essence, the leader must develop emotional stamina to tolerate insecurity, irritation, and agony in change (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Heifetz and Laurie (1997) proposed that the leader would communicate either confidence or concern to the follower, which will significantly affect the success of the change process. Regulating one's personal distress requires intentional self-management. Practically speaking, Heifetz et al. (2009a) recommended that adaptive leaders replace cynicism with optimism and realism, find emotional sanctuaries for reflection, develop confidants, permit real emotions in the workplace, and find identity outside of the organization.

**Maintain disciplined attention.** Within any adaptive change process, the leader should encourage followers to remain committed to the work (Northouse, 2016). Due to the natural volatility in change processes, many workers will employ work avoidance mechanisms to reduce stress (Heifetz, 1994). Heifetz (1994) defined work avoidance as the propensity to divert focus away from one's core responsibilities as to withdraw temporarily from the pressures of the situation. Therefore, the leader should utilize the balcony view to detect various forms of work avoidance, including disregarding or discrediting problems, reassigning blame to leadership or colleagues, attacking change agents, or working on irrelevant tasks (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Northouse, 2016). To counteract avoidance mechanisms, the adaptive leader fosters dialogue to address conflicts and refocuses people's attention on the change process (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

**Give the work back to the people.** As expressed in a previous section, adaptive challenges become difficult to identify or resolve through traditional leadership structures; rather, these challenges require leaders to encourage followers to tackle and solve the problem (Heifetz,

1994). The temptation of leadership is to act decisively, but this action unnecessarily protects followers from the burden, discomfort, and necessity to change (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

Leaders should empower people to solve problems and to assume more responsibility for the outcomes (Heifetz, 1994). In illustrating adaptive leadership within the military, Useem (2010) called for leaders to communicate clear goals, avoid micromanaging, and rely on the creativity of people.

DeRue (2011) recognized the limitations of a one-directional, leader-follower relationship and presented shared leadership as a relevant alternative. Within dynamic contexts, leaders and followers may share roles, which supports Heifetz's (1994) theory of emergent leaders in adaptive challenges. Schreiber and Carley (2006) proposed that participative-style leadership fosters interaction and interdependence among people, which enhances the flow of knowledge between teammates. Consequently, the environment fosters behaviors that lead to higher levels of adaptive leadership. Such behaviors enable individuals and organizations to overcome complex challenges (Schreiber & Carley, 2006).

**Protect leadership voices from below.** The final behavior of adaptive leadership is protecting the opinions of marginalized individuals within the organization. This behavior necessitates that leaders listen carefully and stay receptive to the views of those without authority (Northouse, 2016). Organizations regularly invalidate these individuals in response to poor timing, unclear explanations, and awkward communication tactics (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). As a result, leaders often overlook possible solutions to complex challenges.

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) suggested that leader permit the lower members of the organization to share their unique perspectives, while avoiding the impulse to silence these important voices. As a result, these members become more involved with and responsible for

the outcomes of their work (Northouse, 2016). Within this framework, the effective leader manages the complexity through an open dialogue between members that encourages opposing and diverse opinions (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

### **Adaptive Work**

As illustrated in figure 1, the adaptive work is the outcome of the aforementioned leadership behaviors (Northouse, 2016). This work takes place within the holding environment, where followers feel safe as they tackle the adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1994). Heifetz (1994) suggested that the leader invests significant time and energy to establish and maintain this safe environment. Moreover, from the beginning, the leader does not utilize their position or authority to motivate people and results; rather, the leader engages with the followers to complete the work (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Through great perseverance and constant dialogue, the leader and followers progress toward the ultimate goal of resolving the adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1994).

### **Strengths**

Adaptive leadership presents a practical model for managing complex challenges in higher education or any other environment. In its current condition, the theory possesses multiple strengths. First, the theory presents a process-oriented approach to leadership, versus highlighting individual traits or characteristics of a leader (Randall & Coakley, 2007).

According to Randall and Coakley (2007), this process requires people, including the leader and followers, to respond to the imminent challenge through creative thinking. Furthermore, this process fosters employee commitment as all members become active agents in the change process (Heifetz, 1994).

Within contemporary leadership studies, an emerging perspective is the reconceptualization of the leader's role. The traditional concept of hierarchical authority inadequately manages complex social and organizational environments; rather, the leadership process involves a sharing of roles and responsibilities (DeRue, 2011). The trend in contemporary studies is the reconceptualization of leadership as a complex adaptive process, which emphasizes the importance of leaders throughout the organization (DeRue, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). As evidence of this trend, the adaptive leadership theory articulates a process for empowering the followers to tackle complex challenges (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009b; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Randall & Coakley, 2007).

Second, within this process-oriented approach, the theory emphasizes a follower-centric framework. Most leadership studies focus on the supervisory relationship between the leader and follower (DeRue, 2011). These studies generally associate the leader with possessing formal authority and managerial responsibilities over a set of individuals (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hunt & Dodge, 2000). DeRue (2011) proposed that this traditional view of the leader-follower relationship is limited to hierarchical supervision, downward influence, the leader's traits or characteristics, and the effectiveness of the leader within various environments.

In contrast, the adaptive theory focuses on a bi-directional perspective of leadership, wherein the leader-follower relationship is more dynamic and fluid (DeRue, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In this model, people can transition between leadership and followership based on the work of the group (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). In secure environments, where the group experiences a relative calm, transitions between leader and follower roles take place less frequently, and the same people may lead and follow over a long duration (Hollenbeck et al.,

2002). In a dynamic situation, the needs of the group may shift, thus requiring a leader-follower transition (DeRue, Hollenbeck, Johnson, Ilgen, & Jundt, 2008). In summary, the adaptive leadership theory deemphasizes the hierarchical role of the leader, and it emphasizes the dynamic nature of leadership in complex situations.

Emphasis, then, shifts from the role of leadership in managing hierarchical systems to developing and maintaining a safe environment (Northouse, 2016). Randall and Coakley (2007) described this task as establishing a safe haven, wherein followers have the greatest potential to succeed. The envelopment and development of the follower become paramount to the leader.

Third, the theory highlights the role of leadership in confronting opposing value systems. Any adaptive challenge always necessitates the need for change and learning, which can quickly overwhelm followers with its fast pace and high demands (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Northouse (2016) contended that no other leadership theory includes, as its core purpose, helping people confront and regulate their value systems. This strength further differentiates the theory as a process-oriented and follower-centric approach, where the impetus for change resides in the people versus the leader. Daly and Chrispeels (2008) attempted to operationalize the adaptive leadership theory and found trust to be an important component in the change process, particularly as followers confront their value systems. This research highlights the central focus of the adaptive leader in developing and enabling the follower.

Fourth, adaptive leadership provides a practical guide for overcoming complex challenges. Through their contributions, Heifetz and his research team (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009b; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), provided meaningful ideas for engaging in the work of adaptive leadership. Northouse (2016) described the behaviors of this theory as prescriptions or recipes for how adaptive leadership should function. By focusing on the followers, adaptive

leadership presents a model for addressing change through the energy and values of people, versus the traditional vision and charisma of the leader (Randall & Coakley, 2007). These prescriptions provide a meaningful pathway for leaders to address complex challenges.

Last, the theory uniquely contributes the concept of the holding environment as a critical aspect of the change process (Northouse, 2016). Largely influenced by the psychotherapy field, Heifetz (1994) called for a safe environment where followers can address their value systems and tackle the complex challenge. Open discussion and debate characterize this environment (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Northouse (2016) postulated that few leadership studies ascribe leaders the responsibility for creating and maintaining this environment. As a theory, adaptive leadership further delineates as a process-oriented and follower-centric model by emphasizing the importance of the safe environment within change processes.

### **Criticisms**

Although adaptive leadership provides significant contributions to leadership studies, the theory presents several major weaknesses. First, when presented in *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994), Heifetz offered a practical model for theory development, which relied on anecdotal concepts versus empirical research (Northouse, 2016). Even Heifetz's (1994) description of the framework presented the scholarship as theory-building work (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008).

Since its inception more than 20 years ago, little empirical testing has occurred to test the validity of Heifetz's claims. Dinh et al. (2014) conducted an extensive evaluation of top-tier academic journals between 2000 and 2012 and found that adaptive leadership received consideration in five articles, which reflected less than 1% of the articles on leadership theories. Furthermore, 100% of the research focused on theory building versus an empirical testing of

assumptions. For this reason, Northouse (2016) recommended that the theory receive careful consideration as the model lacks evidence-based support for its core concepts.

Second, the conceptualization of the theory's process-orientation requires additional refinement. Northouse's (2016) visual illustration from figure 1 presents the behaviors of adaptive leadership as practical guides for helping followers tackle challenges. However, the theory requires more development to "clarify the essential factors in the model, the empirical relationship among these factors, and the process through which these factors lead to adaptive change within groups and organizations" (Northouse, 2016, p. 276).

As a contrast, Luthans and Avolio (2003) presented a conceptual framework to outline the interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics of an authentic leader. This theory finds evidence-based support through the utilization of the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Therefore, this leadership theory offers a process-oriented conceptual framework that outlines the essential factors in the model and the empirical linkage between these factors (Avolio et al., 2009).

Third, the adaptive leadership theory receives criticism for being too broad and abstract. Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009b; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) presented behaviors such as "identifying loyalties," "protecting leadership voices below," "mobilize the systems," "name the defaults," "hold steady," "act politically," "anchor yourself," and many other phrases to describe the work of the adaptive leader. Northouse (2016) challenged that these descriptors "lack specificity and clarity" (p. 277), which leads some individuals to surmise their own interpretation of these phrases.

Furthermore, across the scholarly works of Heifetz's and his colleague, the terminology shifted to accommodate new audiences. Articles from 2004 and 2009 presented new descriptors

of adaptive leadership behaviors (Heifetz et al., 2009a; Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004). This ongoing modification of terminology supports Northouse's (2016) observation that the theory is open for interpretation.

Last, the adaptive theory does not directly integrate a moral dimension of leadership. The focus is on the leader's role to mobilize followers to "tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 14). It is not clear whether the mobilization of followers leads to positive social outcomes. Northouse (2016) suggested that the theory recognizes the significance "equality, justice, and community" (p. 277), but the connection remains unclear between the leader's work and fulfilling these positive social outcomes.

In contrast, the authentic leadership model offers an overt moral dimension. In evaluating the theory, Walumbwa and his colleagues (2008) articulated that the authentic leader utilizes an internal moral value system versus the pressures of the external environment to guide their actions. Furthermore, competence in moral reasoning enables the authentic leader to advocate for positive social outcomes (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Northouse (2016) noted similar constructs in the transformational and servant leadership models.

### **Conclusion**

Adaptive leadership focuses on mobilizing people to address complex challenges. Developed and proposed by Heifetz (1994), the adaptive leadership theory deemphasizes traditional command and control mechanisms to solve problems; instead, the theory highlights the leader's role to encourage creativity and problem solving in others. The contributions of Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009b; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) provide practical recommendations for leaders in a variety of sectors. While



the practical elements of the theory receive recognition, “the theoretical conceptualizations of adaptive leadership remain in the formative stage” (Northouse, 2016, p. 292).

While other theories may focus on the individual qualities or characteristics of leaders, the adaptive framework concentrates on the followers. The leader serves to mobilize followers to “tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 14). Mobilization occurs within a safe environment, which encourages learning, innovation, and change. The leader behaviors that contribute to follower mobilization are: “(a) get on the balcony, (b) identify adaptive challenges, (c) regulate distress, (d) maintain disciplined attention, (e) give the work back to the people, and (f) protect leadership voices from below” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, pp. 125-129).

Overall, adaptive leadership offers a practical model for leading during complex challenges. The theory presents both strengths and criticisms that necessitate more research. This research should clarify the conceptual framework and substantiate the core propositions of this unique leadership theory.

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