

Teaching leadership from a social constructionist perspective

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Abstract

Traditional approaches to leadership assert that leadership is a definite quality of leaders. In contrast, the social constructionist approach conceptualises leadership as a quality of observers. The goal of this paper is to show how this philosophical base can be used to create a teaching strategy for leadership. In this strategy, there are three learning objectives: understanding the philosophical approach; revealing students' lay theories of leadership; and, skill development. The lessons revolve around understanding how leadership perceptions form so that students appreciate how they are influenced and, in turn, how they might influence other people's perceptions of themselves.

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INTRODUCTION

Social constructionist approaches to leadership have emerged as a response to the problems scholars have had 'nailing down' the concept of leadership (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint & Jackson, 2010; Northouse, 2010). Despite literally thousands of years' research into leadership, it remains a poorly understood construct (Grint, 1997, 2005; Mello, 2003). There is still no commonly accepted definition of leadership (Stogdill, 1974), there is considerable doubt about how, or whether, it can effectively be taught (Doh, 2003), and yet corporations spend billions of dollars every year on leadership development (O'Leonard, 2007; DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

Further, when viewed from the students' perspective, leadership is a 'slippery' subject that they find difficult to grasp. Mello (2003: 344) writes, 'Students are faced with an extensive and, at times, very confusing body of literature that illustrates the complexity of the study, practice, and understanding of leadership. No single theory has been able to capture the essence of leadership and/or leadership dynamics. Students often become frustrated at the array and range of somewhat disparate and contradictory theories they encounter'. Adding to this definitional slipperiness, students are commonly taught leadership by analysing and learning from people that are regarded as great leaders, which is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the great things that the great leaders do are largely detached from the more humble leadership challenges faced by people learning about leadership. Although this feature has an aspirational quality, it does make leadership both abstract and fantastic for most people (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Meindl, 1995). Who can realistically aspire to the things that Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, John F. Kennedy, Eleanor Roosevelt,

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or Harry Potter did? Second, when looking at the actions of leaders, these are behaviours and decisions that were relevant to a particular set of circumstances, which makes drawing lessons particularly challenging for students (Duke, 1998). Third, the underlying model is one in which students draw lessons from role models and use these to adapt their own behaviour. This is problematic when there is distance between the students and the role models they are observing (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and it requires considerable powers of observation, theorising, and conscious modification of behaviour to be successful. Hence, traditional ways of teaching leadership that draw upon theories that positions leadership as a quality of leaders or the environments they inhabit is a problematic one for teaching the subject.

Conceptualising leadership as an emotion rather than a quality of people is an alternative way of thinking about leadership that can make the subject more accessible to students; viewing leadership as an emotion akin to love or beauty changes the focus completely. Instead of analysing Mahatma Gandhi with the purpose of understanding what made him great and then learning lessons for oneself, the purpose of learning changes completely around. It is no longer about understanding Gandhi; instead, it is about understanding oneself and, in particular, what it is about Gandhi that makes one think of him as a leader. Leadership becomes about surfacing one's own lay theory of leadership, understanding how this influences one's behaviour, and using an understanding of these processes to understand leadership in the environments and contexts that are inhabited. Taking this approach, leadership becomes relevant to everyone and every environment. In the leadership literature, this way of thinking about leadership is usually termed the social construction of leadership.

The social constructionist perspective on leadership (which is broadly defined as a set of approaches that make leadership a quality of the observer rather than the leader, and more narrowly defined as 'the outcome of people having to make sense of their encounters with the physical world and with other people' (Blaikie, 2008: 22)) is primarily used as a counterpoint to more traditional approaches (e.g., trait theory, situational theory, contingency theory, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, charismatic leadership). Grint and Jackson (2010) equate it with critical management studies in the way that it highlights weaknesses in more accepted and mainstream approaches. However, they acknowledge a problem with the approach and say that it is 'great on critique but thin on alternative' (Grint & Jackson, 2010: 349). My experience of working with these ideas in various classrooms is very different. I have found them to be *the* most useful ideas for teaching leadership and ones that have a strongly practical focus. In this essay, I shall explain how I have come to this conclusion, show how a social constructionist approach to leadership brings the topic alive for students, and outline a teaching strategy based on these ideas that is practical and performance oriented.

I begin the paper by briefly explaining the social constructionist approach to leadership illustrating major variations in the ways it has been conceptualised. I follow this with a discussion of how the social constructionist approach translates into a pedagogy for leadership. The final section of the paper explores the teaching method in detail by outlining a three-stage model that has a social constructionist approach both as its theoretical underpinning and its content.

Defining leadership from a social constructionist perspective

Put simply, the social constructionist approach to leadership places leadership in the mind of the observer rather than a quality of the leader. In this way, leadership is analogous to beauty; it is in the eye of the beholder. By making leadership a product of the observer, this perspective explains many leadership riddles such as why people regard people differently as leaders. It also explains why no common definition of leadership can be agreed upon (Stogdill, 1974) and why completely different approaches to leadership work in similar situations. Furthermore, the social constructionist perspective 'challenges the privileging of a researcher-imposed view of leadership in favour of lay actors' constructions of the concept' (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010: 172).

People construct their own lay theories of leadership. This explains the ‘construction’ in ‘social construction’, that is, leadership is a construction in the minds of observers, but it does not explain the ‘social’ element. A social constructionist perspective to leadership is more than simply placing leadership assessments in the eye of the beholder. People are not free from social influence and people’s ideas about who is and is not a leader change and coalesce over time as they hear other people’s views and assess them against their own; hence, ‘truth’ emerges in people’s minds from a competition between various accounts and interpretations. Grint (1997) argues that people hear many ‘voices’ that influence their own lay theories of leadership, but that these ‘voices’ do not have equal weight. Some are more dominant than others and become the accepted view, regardless of the ‘reality’ of the person or the situation. Hence, ‘we may never know what the true essence of a leader or the situation actually is and must often base our actions and beliefs on the accounts of others from whom we can (re)constitute our version of events’ (Grint, 1997: 6).

Beneath this simple view of the social constructionist approach there are a dizzying array of different perspectives, conceptualisations, and methods (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Nevertheless, Sandberg (2001) argues that four features are common to all social constructionist approaches to leadership. The first is dualistic ontology. This is the idea that there are two entities, the subject and the object, that are separate and independent of each other. When leadership is the issue, the two entities are usually a person perceived as a leader and the person perceiving the individual. The separation of the two entities allows the instructor to explore independent qualities or attributes of both parties.

The second common theme is the idea of objectivistic epistemology. This is the notion that beyond human consciousness there is an objective reality. Hence, social construction is not the completely illusory approach that it is often misrepresented to be. As put by Fairhurst and Grant (2010: 175), ‘the lay theories, discourses, and sense making of leadership actors are not just anecdotal afterthoughts, niceties to be compared with the more objective and sanitized doings of science’. Instead, social constructionists believe that there is a reality and that it is through people’s interpretation that meaning comes (Sandberg, 2001).

Individualistic epistemology is Sandberg’s (2001) third common feature. This is the idea that the individual is the prime creator of knowledge about reality. The interest of the instructor is the variability and consistency of people’s views, which highlights the individuals’ lay theories of leadership. Making the issue more complex is the extension that although every individual may have his or her own reality about a leader or leadership situation, so does every other person. This makes leadership a contested concept with different voices competing for dominance (Gallie, 1956; Meindl, 1995; Grint, 1997, 2000, 2005).

The fourth common feature of social construction is the role of language as a mirror of objective reality (Sandberg, 2001). Put simply, this is the idea that language can represent or mirror reality in an objective fashion. Language plays a complex part in social construction. On one level, it is the medium through which reality is achieved. It is also the feature that some researchers focus on to study leaders while others expand their focus to include, ‘for example, the use of space, the body, clothing, technology, and so on’ (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010: 190).

In summary, although there are many subtleties and conceptual differences within social constructionist perspectives on leadership, four factors unite them. For me, these four factors provide a structure upon which a teaching strategy can be built.

A TEACHING STRATEGY

Although there is considerable agreement that leadership can be taught and learned, there is considerable disagreement on definitions and conceptualisations of the subject (Doh, 2003; Gill, 2006; Nahavandi, 2006; Middlebrooks & Allen, 2009). One major advantage of a socially-constructed approach to

leadership is that it dodges many of these problems as it relies upon surfacing and exploring students' own lay theories of leadership. Moreover, its underlying principles offer instructors an opportunity to align their teaching methods with their theoretical approach to leadership. As mentioned above, the four commonalities of social construction identified by Sandberg (2001) can be used to develop a teaching strategy.

The concept of dualistic ontology gives validity to students as valued observers of leaders; it gives students the 'right' to view, analyse, and critique the leadership of others. Their views reflect their approach to leadership. Moreover, dualistic ontology forces instructors to acknowledge and incorporate students' own backgrounds into the analysis when discussing leadership. If they do not do this, instructors' teaching will be out of step with the theoretical perspective that insists that both object and subject are considered.

Traditional leadership teaching focuses on the explanation and application of theories of leadership. However, the notion of objectivistic and individualistic epistemology gives prominence to students' lay theories of leadership. Teasing these out of students in a manner that allows them to understand their own priorities, values, and biases becomes the dominant learning objective. In this way, students' thoughts on leadership are the 'truths' to be discovered. Helping students find their own understanding of what leadership is, exploring the implications of these lay views, and analysing the application of them in their own situations become the most important goals of leadership development.

Such an approach is anathema to many instructors (Prawat & Floden, 1994). The instructor is no longer 'the one who knows', the most knowledgeable person who 'teaches' the students. Gone are the leadership theories, the lecture notes, the case studies, and everything else that makes the instructor the wise one in the room. Instead, when the instructor enters the social constructionist classroom, he or she does not know the 'truth' of his or her subject. Instead, the role is one of facilitator; he or she has to be an expert in helping people draw out and make sense of their own deeply held thoughts on leadership (Prawat & Floden, 1994).

Language is an essential medium in this process. It is through discussion and debate that perceptions of leadership emerge and are contested. Grint (1997: 6) argues that 'the ancient study of rhetoric provides one significant element of leadership training since it may be persuasive powers that hold the key to leadership success. Political networking, interpersonal skills, material wealth, and negotiating skills are the hallmark of this approach'. Scholars who focus exclusively on language are called 'monomodal'. In contrast, 'multimodal' social constructionists (e.g., Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007) would enrich the manner in which leadership is contested to include non verbal communication such as visual tells, intended and unintended physical effects, and position to produce a complex picture. They might ask students to analyse interpersonal behaviour, how environments are arranged, and the wider context to enrich discussion.

In summary, the goals of leadership education are about helping students understand their own definition of leadership, its complexity, and understanding leadership in their own environments. This is facilitated through debate and contest. The remainder of this paper sets out a sequential three-stage curriculum for the teaching of leadership from a social constructionist perspective. This curriculum structure is appropriate for undergraduate, postgraduate, and executive classes.

STAGE 1: EXPLAINING THE APPROACH

The emergence of the social constructionist perspective on leadership is a reaction to the failure of traditional approaches to deliver the truth about leadership and has implications for how the subject of leadership is taught. Although it is increasingly able to stand on its own two feet as a leadership theory (Grint, 2005; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint & Jackson, 2010), teaching from this perspective without first explaining traditional leadership theories is not recommended. There are two

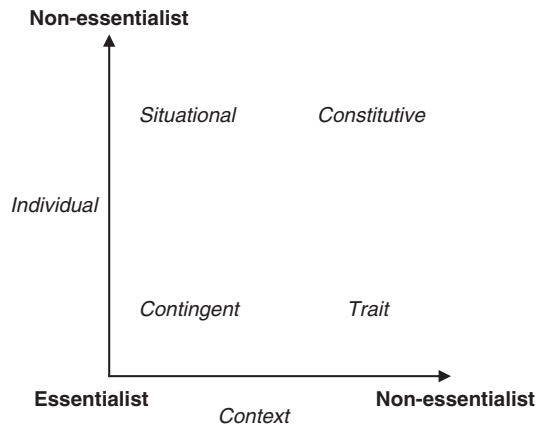


FIGURE 1. GRINT'S (1997) DIVISIONS OF LEADERSHIP THEORIES

reasons for this. The first is a practical reason relating to student reaction. There is a danger that by omitting traditional leadership theories, students will be frustrated, feeling that they are missing out on the foundational knowledge of the subject. Moreover, those who dislike social construction will always have the traditional theories to 'beat you up with'. The second reason is pedagogical. By showing the weaknesses to which social construction is a reaction, students are both more likely to buy into the approach and be better positioned to understand it. In addition, by explaining the theoretical underpinnings of the approach by showing 'what it is' and 'what it is not', students are more likely to understand what is being taught, why it is being taught, and how to position other ideas in the curriculum. This is crucial because the social constructionist perspective on leadership is not a set of theories to learn and apply, rather it is a fundamentally different approach in which the prime goal is to uncover and explore students' own beliefs about leadership.

Most leadership instructors will already have their own materials for teaching the main theories. To these I would recommend adding Grint's (1997) 2×2 grid that categorises the traditional theories of leadership and positions the social constructionist perspective against them (see Figure 1). His analysis of the leadership literature highlights that two dimensions (the person and the situation) are central to most theories of leadership and that most extant theories have an element of certainty and knowingness about them (Yukl, 1994; Grint, 1997, 2005). For example, trait-based theories assume that it is possible to know which elements of the person contribute to their leadership success, situational theories assume it is possible to analyse a particular context so that particular leadership responses can be tailored, and contingency theories assume it is possible to determine the leadership characteristics of both the person and the situation so that adaptations can be made to both to enable leadership to thrive (Shackleton, 1995). The social constructionist approach is in the fourth quadrant (termed 'Constitutive') where both the person and the situation are unknowable.

A simple activity that can be deployed in the lecture theatre or a classroom to demonstrate the validity of the social constructionist approach is as follows. Ask the participants, singly, in groups, or as a whole, to identify people that everyone would agree is a leader. By playing devil's advocate, it is relatively straightforward to refute students' suggestions thereby demonstrating that there is no agreed definition of what leadership means or who is one. An interesting by-product of this activity is that there tends to be more agreement on the leadership credentials of historical figures, which can be used to highlight the 'social' element of social construction. As Grint (1997: 9) says, 'this does not mean that leadership is whatever anyone wants it to be; it is what certain powerful 'voices' make it. All voices

may be equal but some are more equal than others'. Over time, the power voices persuade many people about who we should and who we should not consider leaders.

STAGE 2: REVEALING LAY THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP

Intuitively, the most natural way to reveal students' lay theories of leadership is to have them talk about people they regard as leaders from their own experience. Executive students might be encouraged to discuss people from the workplace who they regard as a leader; undergraduate students might be asked to choose and describe a contemporary figure they regard as a leader. The idea is that by describing the people they regard as leaders and receiving feedback from the facilitator or classmates, they learn about their own approach to leadership. Intuitive as this approach might be, it is fraught with problems that limit its ability to reveal lay theories of leadership. One problem is that the students who are talking about the people they believe to be leaders are doing so from a privileged position within the group (Posner, 2009). They alone have seen these people acting in these ways. Those hearing their stories are at the mercy of the information conveyed by the speaker and the speaker is always able to rebut critical feedback as ill-informed. An associated problem is that students are relying on memory and, no matter how vivid, this is subject to attribution, selectivity, recall, and cognitive biases, amnesia and many other factors reducing its ability to represent a full picture. Another problem with this method is that the students presenting their leadership examples are partly engaged in advocacy; they are attempting to persuade the listeners that the people they are focusing on are leaders. In such circumstances, speakers are likely to avoid vulnerability thereby making them less receptive to challenging ideas. Moreover, their accounts are likely to be biased towards actions and outcomes and must contain only those aspects of behaviour of which the speaker is consciously aware. All of which makes the approach of drawing from experience troublesome when trying to reveal students' lay theories of leadership. On top of these practical reasons, it must be noted that this approach violates dualistic ontology because object and subject are not kept separate.

Instead, a facilitation approach is needed that encourages students to talk about perceptions of leadership where all participants to the discussion have a similar opportunity to observe and analyse leaders operating in their own contexts; that is, keeping objects and subjects separate (dualistic ontology), acknowledge the value of all perceptions (objectivistic epistemology), and allow students to find their own truths (individualistic epistemology). If the facilitator's teaching method is monomodal (i.e., language) written or audio media may suffice. However, if the teaching method is multimodal, facilitators are likely to use media in which leadership candidates (adopting this activity the facilitator can never be sure that people presented as leaders will be viewed as leaders by everyone present) can be seen and heard; smell, touch and taste seem unlikely, and risky, senses to include! This opens the door to film, television, opera, theatrical performance and sports events. Whichever is chosen, the most useful are likely to be recorded so that they can be replayed enabling in-depth, frame-by-frame analysis. To illustrate how this recorded audio-visual can be used for revealing lay theories of leadership, I shall focus on the use of feature films.

There now exists a literature on the use of films in management education. In most published approaches, film is used to illustrate concepts and theories or to show the application of theory to 'real' situations (Ambrosini, Billsberry, & Collier, 2009). When using audio-visual media within a social constructionist leadership framework, a different set of learning objectives come to the fore. This involves a three-stage process with deeper learning at each subsequent level. The three stages are: *identification* (all the students are asked to watch the same film with the instruction of identifying who they regard as leaders (if any) in the film), *explanation* (the students are asked to explain what made them choose these people), and *deep analysis* (students forensically analyse the film in-depth to explore the ways in which their perceptions have been formed). This third level of analysing films is

interesting because everything put before viewers' eyes is manipulated; directors, actors, editors, directors of photography, lighting engineers, sound engineers, scriptwriters, etc. all do intended (and unintended) things to create the illusion of leadership in films. Identifying, disentangling, and understanding how these effects influence one's own perceptions does not just help students understand their own lay theory of leadership, it also helps them understand how others may respond to their own attempts to change the way they come across to people.

All three stages can play host to discussion and dialogue about the students' lay theories of leadership with the realistic prospect of helping the students' understand their own definition of leadership better. Similarly, the students could work independently, as a whole, or in groups at all three stages as well. Much will depend on the priorities and objectives of the facilitator. The key feature of this approach is that object and subject are kept separate, students are denied privileged positions, students are encouraged to focus on their own conceptualisation of leadership, and differences of opinion and analysis (on who and why someone is considered a leader) provide insight to the students about their own lay theories, thereby aligning pedagogy and underlying theory.

STAGE 3: DEVELOPING SKILLS

Once students have worked through the first two stages they should have developed an understanding of mainstream theories of leadership and the social constructionist reaction to them and have developed an understanding of their own lay theory of leadership. Once this base has been achieved, attention turns to improving students' ability to perform as leaders. Once again, the social constructionist perspective on leadership provides guidance as to how this might be achieved and a full teaching curriculum can be advanced. It is based on the idea that improving leadership revolves around influencing the way that people are perceived. I have divided this into four sections: intrapersonal, interpersonal, impressional, and change agent.

During the process of revealing their own lay theories of leadership, students will have focused on themselves. At the core of this approach is the idea that one has to know oneself in order to change oneself and understand others. But understanding one's own lay theory of leadership is just the tip of the iceberg and there are many more intrapersonal skills that might be usefully developed within a leadership context. These might include self-awareness, an appreciation of the impact of personality, self-concept, and attribution and perceptual errors on behaviour, self-control, emotional intelligence, career management, critical thinking, divergent and convergent thinking, and the development of a broad range of interests and knowledge. There is a vast array of personal development tools and techniques that can be used to develop awareness of oneself including career mapping, T-groups, 360° assessment, role plays, and inventories.

By putting leadership in the mind of the observer, this theory throws attention on to the interaction between leaders and followers. This aspect of developing leadership abilities has two elements: general interpersonal skills and skills directly targeted at influencing the way that the leader is perceived by others (i.e., impression management skills). The general interpersonal skills focus on language and communication and include skills related to listening, presenting, and questioning, manipulation of tone of voice, lexical choice, managing body language and other non-verbal cues, and a set of abilities around forming arguments and rhetoric. The impressional skills include networking, influencing, politicking, managing appearance, sycophancy, and environment scanning. Again, there is a huge number of tools and techniques that can be used by facilitators developing these interpersonal and impressional skills. The choice is likely to depend on the nature of the lay theories that are uncovered in Stage 2 above, the nature of the leadership environments and challenges the students face, and the biases of the facilitator.

Since the early 1990s, leaders have been turned into change agents (Kotter, 1990; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Although this way imposes a theoretical stance, it is one that aligns with social

construction, so long as the focus is on how the leader helps construct beliefs about the need for change, its goals, and the change process. Topics that might be included in such an approach include resistance to change, planning, understanding people, motivation, and decision making.

These four areas have a strong focus on skills and most are grounded in psychology in some way. One crucial element is missing; an element that underpins the successful implementation of these skills. That element is domain relevant expertise. In short, for the successful deployment of intrapersonal, interpersonal, impressional, and change skills, 'leaders' must have expertise in the subject if they are to be credible. Sadly, unless the outlined course is developed and run for in-company purposes, it can only operate at a generic, non-context specific level in an undergraduate or masters curriculum. Hence, the outlined course does not include some crucial domain specific knowledge, skills and expertise that is often crucial in establishing leadership credentials.

FINAL THOUGHT

Most leadership theories assume that leadership is a quality of leaders (e.g., trait theory), or a response to environments (e.g., situational theory), or a combination of both (e.g., contingency theory). In all these approaches leadership is something knowable and definite. However, after years of research there is no agreed definition of what leadership is, or any universal agreement about who might be regarded a leader. In this paper I have outlined an alternative approach based around the social constructionist perspective on leadership. Not only does this approach explain why traditional ways of teaching leadership have been unsuccessful, it provides a radically different pedagogy for the subject. It validates students' own lay theories of leadership and builds practical skills based on the development of intrapersonal, interpersonal, impressional and change agent skills. Such a student-centred and practical approach is a radical departure from most university courses on the subject. It is not an easy option for students or instructors as it requires reimagining traditional pedagogic strategies that put theories at the fore (Perkins, 2006). Nevertheless, this is an approach that is grounded in a rich theoretical tradition and it has the strong benefit that pedagogic strategy and leadership theory are aligned.

I want to end by responding to the 'Does it work?' question. I have now used this way of teaching leadership in undergraduate, postgraduate, and executive classrooms and it has always been well received. But it would be wrong to rely upon student satisfaction scores to validate the method as these are known to have many problems (Schmidt-Wilk, 2010; Sitzmann, Ely, Brown, & Bauer, 2010). Instead, I should like to offer an offbeat justification. There is a threshold concept at the heart of this approach to teaching leadership. A threshold concept is a learning transition that, once learned, changes someone's perception or understanding of a subject forever (Meyer & Land, 2005; Wright & Gilmore, 2012). Once learned, there is no going back. I have noticed that once my students accept that leadership is an emotion and a quality of observers, it stays with them; they have crossed a threshold. And crucially, once they cross this threshold they appreciate the value of developing skills that allow them to assess and change the way they are perceived by others.

Leadership is a very attractive topic to universities and students alike. The word 'leadership' is understood in common parlance as being about great people who change the world; it is the discipline that focuses on the practical skill of making a difference on things that matter. When they describe leaders, people naturally think about the great men and women who have had an impact. Sadly though, universities have struggled to make the academic discipline of leadership a practical one that transforms the people who take it. Leadership is so context and situation specific that it makes it incredibly difficult to develop generic advice that offers practical help in students' own environments. As a result, leadership courses tend to focus on an analysis of leaders and the situations they inhabit and then draw conclusions for themselves. But this practical element is compromised because the situations of the studied leaders and those of the students are so different.

The approach I have advanced in this paper solves this problem because the underlying theory conceptualises leadership as a concept in the minds of observers. In doing so, it takes away the problem of learning from people who were successful in their own specific and particular circumstances. Instead, leadership becomes a topic that is grounded in students' own perceptions of their environments and focuses on skill development, notably understanding human behaviour, analysing environments, and developing behavioural modifications to suit. Such skills can be taught generically across the various contexts that the students inhabit, and this turns leadership from a dry 'academic' subject into a practical one, which is what students want.

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