THE RESURRECTION OF THE MATRIX AND THE SEARCH FOR STATESMANSHIP[1]

The matrix or multidimensional structure evokes strong feelings and sentiments. I have even heard CEOs with great emphasis declare: "I hate matrix organizations".

I intend to share with you my understanding of some of the underlying mechanisms and presumptions about multidimensional management in general and the matrix organization in particular. I will discuss three questions:

1. **Why is there sometimes a sort of resistance to speak about multidimensional organization and matrix organization?**
2. **Why is it difficult to measure the success of these types of structures?**
3. **What is needed from managers in multidimensional and matrix organizations?**

Finally, I formulate what I consider perhaps the most important question to ask, when contemplating going for a matrix (or "matrix-like") design in your organization.

1. Why is there sometimes a sort of resistance to speak about multidimensional organization and matrix organization in the context of contemporary organizational theory and design?

In his 2008 book, Jay Galbraith, who was as one of the most prolific thinkers and writers on organization design in general and multidimensional organization in particular, wrote:

> *On several occasions throughout my career, I have considered writing a book om matrix organizations. Each time I decided not to use "matrix" in the title and wrote about organization design or global organization instead.*
>
> *In the 1970, matrix was too trendy. I thought that once the backlash set in, the book would stop selling.*
>
> *Unfortunately, I was correct. By the 1980s, it was common belief that matrix structures do not work. Under these conditions, no one would buy the book to begin with.*
>
> (Jay Galbraith, 2008)

As illustrated in this quote, a positive view on matrix organization was not something that would boost your career, neither in business nor in the academic field.

[1] This text is based on a lecture held at The Jay Galbraith Seminar, August 25th, 2015.

This was however not always the case. In the 1970´s and 80´s people viewed it differently. Let us explore some thoughts on why matrix organizations at the time were highest fashion.

First of all, since the beginning of organized society, we have been fascinated by the concept of *fit,* which is a close relative to symmetry. Fit and symmetry would for example suggest that big tragedies must have big causes.[2] In a similar fashion, we expect complex and multidimensional problems are best managed by complex and multidimensional structures. There has to be a proper fit between the problem, the process of solving it and its final solution.

Secondly, there is a *perceived rationality* in structure and organization (at least compared to a seemingly chaotic mess) that is almost impossible to resist. Meyer and Rowan have noted that the perceived rationality of organization structure makes it very rational to organize. And who do not want to be rational? Because the hammer is such an excellent tool, we use nails everywhere.

However, both the importance of a fit between task environment and structure and the rationality of a structure itself is difficult to verify in real life: on the contrary, even the most uncomplicated organizations seem to cope with complex problems and tasks. And multidimensional structures often have difficulties in solving multidimensional issues – but are on the other hand very apt in solving simple tasks. And many break-through inventions have been developed in highly unstructured environments, characterized by loose couplings and ”skunk work”, not in an orderly structure.

The practical experiences of matrix organizations and other multidimensional structures (or what the late professor Jay Galbraith referred to as ”matrixed” and other call “collaborative structures” in order to avoid the m-word) point to other drawbacks and inefficiencies:

- These structures differentiate between control over and ownership of resources, leading to lengthy discussions in the organization and sometimes motivating the implementation of complicated internal sell-and-buy systems and procedures.
- They seem to foster bureaucracy and an abundance of travelling, meetings and discussions.
- Multidimensional structures are usually difficult to measure and monitor, while at the same time not promoting attention to detail (everyone is working in the cockpit).
- They are built on conflict and the multitude of internal and external contacts make communication difficult and time-consuming
- They can be seen as ambiguous and difficult to describe, communicate and understand (not the least when approached by an institutional context of for example legislators, tax authorities and trade unions, themselves– and sometimes assuming the rest of the world – organized according to different principles)

[2] When the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was killed 1986 it had to be part of a conspiracy, not done by a single , frustrated and confused lonely killer.

Managers working in such matrixed structures can usually cite examples of dysfunctional behaviour among their peers, subordinates and bosses, behaviour that will be counterproductive to the structure. Such dysfunctional behaviour can appear in the various intersections in the multidimensional structure, the ”nodes” where different perspectives or dimensions meet. Examples of these behaviours include:

The bazaar or *the constant negotiation.* Negotiating is part of everyday life in most organizations. You negotiate for resources, commitment, support or attention. And then the organization is involved in more formal negotiations with customers, suppliers, trade unions etc. The modern organizational life breeds skilled negotiators, and many organizations refer to concepts like internal customers and internal suppliers in order to enhance effectiveness in internal dealings. On the other hand, constant negotiations consume time and energy and the outcome, although reflecting a way of conflict resolution is not automatically always the short- and long term most beneficial. More than other structures, the matrixed organization requires negotiated solutions to issues and problems, and hence the structure can be more sensitive to the pitfalls of constant negotiations.

Another dysfunctional behaviour is falling into the trap of “*paralysis through analysis*”. This is closely linked to the specific feature of a matrix structure to tend to increase rather than decrease the uncertainty and ambiguity. In such a situation we search for more information, in order to improve our analysis. We try to find the optimal solution rather than a “good-enough”-solution. We broaden the scope and depth of the analysis and establish more alternatives and options. This is often combined with a tendency of finding out “who is responsible” (both concerning successes and failures), and in such culture avoiding risk, is promoted.

The paralysis through analysis also breeds an organization where most of the people seem to be very occupied and extremely busy, all the time. There are meetings with reference groups, steering committees, check-ups or sheer data mining work, analysis and report writing.

Some managers keep themselves very busy – other managers become invisible. We can call them *BOHICAns* using the acronym for Bend Over Here It Comes Again. BOHICA is reflecting a cynical view on change: changes, initiatives and activities are introduced and then disappear again, everything is void and the best approach by an experienced manager is to avoid commitment or promises, since shortly new initiatives will change everything in a different direction. This withdrawal is not always easily seen; on the contrary, the BOHICA-managers can be very present, and very visible but always somewhat vague and working from a default position of ”wait-and-see”. How is it possible that the BOHICAns survive? Usually they have established a platform (a customer relationship, control over a channel or entrance to a market, institutional relations etc.), which make them almost ”untouchable”. We can also refer to them as “teflon” managers; nothing sticks. And they can continue to move slowly and manage multidimensional problems through doing nothing and hope that the problems – through “divine intervention” - will disappear.

The High Court, i. e. managing conflict through upward delegation, to the next organizational level, is another dysfunctional behaviour. As a consequence, top management run the risk of being involved in decision-making in not only strategic and long-term issues, but also related to operational and short-term issues. In turn, this consumes energy and will slow down the decision-making process. The possibilities for flexible solutions will be reduced, and similar issues will be solved in a similar way, disregarding the local conditions and circumstances. Eventually the multidimensional organization, built to reflect different perspectives and dimensions, no longer exist. The behaviour of managers, delegating upwards, and top managers – accepting a decision-making role in issues that should be solved on a different level – change the organization from a multidimensional structure to a traditional, hierarchical organization.

Some organizations have actively distanced themselves from this way of solving conflicts. If the involved managers cannot solve the problem through dialogue and concessions inside the structure, but instead push the decision upwards, top managers will make a decision – but also communicate in no uncertain terms that the involved managers should consider this a mistake, and a negative thing to have "in their CV".

The dysfunctional behaviour illustrated above, will emphasize and enlarge the disadvantages with the multidimensional organization, and neutralize the possible benefits. The fundamental question is whether a leadership displaying this approach basically is lacking the capacity for leading multidimensional structures?

Disregarding these – certainly most relevant observations - in the mid 80´s the multidimensional organization (and its "icon" the matrix) nevertheless was seen as the organization of the future across industries, sectors and businesses.

Companies like ABB, IBM, Unilever, Caterpillar, Deutsche Bank, Electrolux adopted the global matrix structure, and in doing so they were hailed as forerunners and role models.

However, by 1999 they all had abandoned the multidimensional matrix – and it was not unusual to blame their weak performance financially and otherwise on this "badly" made selection of organizational structure.

In turn, increasingly this became a problem for academic research dealing with multidimensional organization structure. Most of the research and academic study of matrix was deeply connected to one or a few of these case studies of specific companies, and following their change process (and in some cases increased profitability and success when doing so), the multidimensional organization disappeared from the research curriculum. Even in textbooks on organizational design, it was treated shortly, usually with reference to specific companies and without a more generic discussion.

I believe this unfortunate experience casts its shadow on the current discussion on matrix organization. It is like trying to discuss communism, without mentioning the Soviet Union, or capitalism, without talking about the USA. The practical experiences give the theoretical ideas an aura of abstraction.

In the early years of the new millennium, it seemed to be about time to write the final epitaph over the matrix structure: the matrix was nowhere to be seen.

But, strangely enough, this was nothing new or different. Even in the formal matrix organizations of the 1990's the matrix was indeed sometimes deeply hidden. This somewhat paradoxical notion is related to the need for perspective, to decide on a proper vantage point, from where you observe your object. We all know from our everyday efforts to navigate in the city forest or countryside landscape, that if your map is too detailed, you will never get to where you want. In other words, in order to perceive complexity, you need a certain distance. As a consequence, in most of the matrix structures, the full extent of this complex structure could only be properly seen from 10 000 feet off the ground. This is the altitude where executive teams, board of directors and corporate staffs live.

But down in the structure, in the everyday work of departments, profit centres, business units, teams, sales reps, front desk assistants, etc., the structure was one-directional (usually hierarchical), straightforward and far from complex. Hence, perhaps for 95 % of the work performed, the matrix structure was useless or at least irrelevant. In real life, the matrix was indeed nowhere.

On the other hand – and here I quote the action movie *Matrix*–"The matrix is everywhere!" In every organization you find:

- project teams
- process organizations
- cross-functional task forces
- centres of excellence
- shared resources
- etc.

i.e. organizational design solutions establishing various ways of working with multidimensional tasks. These solutions stretch across formal functional and hierarchical structures. *Some writers even note that if you are involved in any type of organization, you most likely work in multidimensional, matrix-like structures.*

And beyond the work life, all of us are involved in managing a multi-dimensional structure, filled with competing priorities, ambiguity and uncertainty, conflicting perspectives; in short, a lot of inexplicable mess. We call that life, and most of us manage it fairly well. We set priorities, negotiate terms, make decisions and in general get things going.

So, the work life experiences and the everyday task of balancing our personal lives, proves to us that we are both willing and capable of working in multidimensional structures. And we need to think like that - because the matrix is everywhere!

So, how can we talk about something that dwells in the field of both being nowhere and being everywhere? Herein lies the difficulty in talking about matrix organizations.

2. Why is it difficult to measure the success of multi-dimensional or matrix structures?

To introduce the second question, I will quote Fred Kindle, 2005-2008 CEO of ABB, a company that in the beginning of the 1990´s almost singlehanded brought the matrix organization into the forefront of organizational design; and a company that with similar determination reorganized itself away from the matrix in the beginning of the new millennium.

> *For me, [the old ABB] was like the famous movie, The Matrix. Total confusion. Nobody knows what is going on, and I don´t like that. Most important is clarity and to some extents simplicity.*
>
> *(Fred Kindle, in Galbraith2008)*

One hundred years of research and practice (both academic and among practitioners) has given us strong ideas and perceptions about what constitutes a ”good organization”. It can be summarized in a few keywords:

1. It will display an efficient use of resources
2. It is unbureaucratic
3. It is simple and unambiguous follow-up (indicators, key ratios etc.)
4. It is helpful in solving - not creating - conflicts
5. It is agile, flexible, resilient, adaptive
6. It can collect and disseminate information rapidly
7. It is capable of fast decision-making
8. It is easy to communicate and understand

We have developed this organizational role model over a long time. According to this perspective, the overall responsibility of a manager is to coordinate, and to use structures of routines, systems etc. for this purpose. Its most well-known advocate is probably Frederik Taylor. Taylor was a man on a mission. In the introduction to his classical book *Scientific Management* from 1911 he writes that the purpose is to find a ”remedy for the great loss which the whole country is suffering through inefficiency in almost all of our daily acts”. Hence, Taylor was not searching for the best general management or leadership principles or the ultimate organization – he would measure his results and suggestions on whether or not they contributed to increase efficiency. Some call this *industrial management.*

As we all know, the issues of efficiency and saving resources are still valid. But we also have to struggle with a shrinking world, while at the same time a more divided world. We need to constantly innovate and have to adapt to disruptive changes. The product life cycles are getting shorter. The sources for competitive advantage are different and new industries emerge and then converge with other industries to both create and serve new market needs. In light of these changes, a question emerges: is the industrial

management mode the best way of coordinating and leading organizations in this context? We of course have to acknowledge that building on Taylor and scientific management, other practices of management have evolved during the last 100 year, and they have refined, modified, and changed the scientific management approach considerably. However, if we try to identify the common denominator, we still by and large will discover an idea of management as relying on routines and guidelines, manuals and handbooks, follow-up and control systems, hierarchical conflict resolving, established and proven methods for solving problems, and reduce variations and increase predictability of the outcome etc. Experience has taught us that these tools will help solving the efficiency issue.

However, some argue that in order to coordinate in the new and changed environment, where additional perspectives need to be considered, we instead need a management focussed on:

- Meetings and conversations
- Networks
- Values
- Consensus
- Experiments
- Feedback

Sometimes this is called *knowledge management.* These ideas were developed in parallel – and sometimes in opposition – to the forays into scientific management tools and procedures, and I will give a few examples.

In the 1980's, professor James March, introduced the difference between exploit and explore, which has had an important impact on the debate. Today writers on ambidextrous organizations and management build further on this.

The exploitation way of managing is designed to use available resources (and existing knowledge) in the best possible way, i.e. efficient. Routines, standards and organizational structures are formed to that end.

On the other hand, an exploring management deals with investigating what will happen. It is built on new knowledge, projections of the future and informed judgement. It acknowledges ambiguity and uncertainty and that there may be more than one way to get to the desired results. It requires risk taking, variation and experiments.

March concludes that exploration and exploitation rarely can co-exist in the same structure. Exploration activities tend destroy what exploitation strives to accomplish, and exploitation put a narrow costume on the explorers, limiting their efforts.

Prior to March´s writings, the urban city planner and design professor Horst Rittel in the 1960´s wrote about two types of problems. He called them *tame* and *wicked*, and they have some characteristics. Tame problems are defined in the following way:

- They are problems we have seen before.
- They may be complicated, but we have the tools available to solve them.

- We are confident that we will succeed.
- It is easy for us to recognize the solution and when the problem is solved.
- We can readily talk about and describe the problem to different audiences

Later, Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch in their book from 1974 about problem formulation and problem solving, used a specific scene to illustrate this type of problems: a man with a broken leg in the emergency room of a hospital, they wrote, is a tame problem (compare with the criteria above). On the contrary, a man with a broken leg in a restaurant (a very different context), is a wicked problem:

- This is something we have not seen before
- We have no established and tested techniques and tools to rely on
- It is possible that we will not even immediately realize when the problem is solved
- We are lacking a good language to use for talking about the problem

How is the notion of tame and wicked problem related to the discourse on industrial and knowledge management? Building on the observations of different management styles to exploit existing knowledge and explore new knowledge, we can assume that the industrial management methods used over a long time have excelled in solving tame problems. We are – to follow in the steps of Watzlawick et. al. – confident that the hospital will successfully cure the broken leg.

However, when facing wicked problems, our problem solving will require exploring beyond the borders of existing knowledge and the use of well-known techniques for learning and knowledge development, i. e. experiments, dialogue and feedback.

If the industrial management focuses on the *metrics* in solving tame problems, the wicked problems requires a very different management, focussing on developing a *matrix for learning*, perspective giving and perspective taking and creation of new knowledge.

The research leading to my thesis on multidimensional problem solving was built on the work of teams of managers in two midsized Swedish multinational companies and how they managed when addressing real business challenges. All in all, around 40 cases were discussed, representing strategic decisions. Most of these problems were easily solved using the existing organization, routines and standards. However, 14 of the strategic challenges I studied could not be successfully solved inside this framework. One way of understanding these problems was to recognize them as wicked, although that was not understood in the beginning of the discussion.

I will give some examples of the problems dealt with, problems that during the process were discovered to have a "wicked" nature. It is again important to underline it that it was in the specific discussion, in the specific context, and during the interaction among the participating managers, this nature emerged as a shared understanding; this is obviously not evident from the wording of the problems. In another context they may very well be considered utterly "tame" and easy to deal with.

- How to manage a global roll-out of products from a newly acquired company?
- How to integrate forward in a global business?
- How to grow a small sales operation in Europe?
- How to build critical mass in a factory serving more than one division?
- How to develop a market for low-end products in the USA?
- How to develop a Key Account System?

Solving these problems required a different leadership approach. In my thesis I call this *matrix mind*, reflecting the inherent multidimensionality and interdependence between perspectives. When trying to understand its characteristics, I however very soon ran into difficulties. Whilst criteria and standards for good industrial management and organizational structures for efficiently exploiting resources were easy to find, apply and compare, criteria measuring the performance of an exploring, and inquisitive leadership were more difficult to establish. Reflecting on this, I found an obvious reason. Central to a multidimensional leadership, just as is the case of the multidimensional or matrixed structure, is the element of learning and – consequently – the essential measurement disclosing a failure is the costs associated to loss of learning opportunities.

I will now turn to the last of the three questions I initially asked.

3. What is needed from managers in multi-dimensional and matrix organizations?

> *Making a matrix work is not about structure. It is not about who has the solid line and who has the dotted line. It is about management communication and relationships between the two sides of the matrix […]. It is about having conversations that matter.*
>
> *(Jay Galbraith, 2008)*

Ten years ago, researchers – many of them related to Harvard – tried to establish the current state of organization and leadership research. They concluded that whilst a lot of progress is done in terms of understanding organizations, less focus is given to understanding and defining leadership, which – they write – is a bit strange since society seem to search for new leadership models in every sector: in political parties, in government and public service, business organization etc. It is as if organization and leadership are two sides of a coin, physically joined together, but difficult to study at the same time.

In my research I have viewed organizational structure as an outflow from the organization´s leadership; and the leadership at the same time as determined by the structure. Hence, I see no conflict between the structure and its management: one is not *per se* more important than the other. In my thesis I was studying the management for solving wicked problems (the matrix management) as a leadership activity and I found

managers with deep interest in structure and a top management deeply involved in creating an organizational framework – or structure – surrounding the problem-solving. Referring to the earlier quote from Jay Galbraith, they were deeply involved in organizing the conversations and more specifically, they carefully positioned the dialogue process – where around 80 top managers met in small groups over a period of 4 years - as both a business development activity and a management development initiative.[3]

In these discussions on structure, top management reflected some strongly held beliefs on how to address the problems:

Firstly, top management (and the participants) vehemently defended the multidimensionality of the issues. They rarely fell for the temptation to quickly declare a certain problem to be a ”marketing issue” and hence to be deferred to the marketing department. Instead, they asked for more perspectives, threw questions to the other participants: ”what if …” Viewed from a metric management perspective they behaved contrary to good management by *increasing* ambiguity, uncertainty and confusion.

Secondly, they carefully developed a language to describe both the present state and the desired future. For example, in one of the cases we spent significant time in trying to define what “customer” meant.

- Is it someone who has ordered something from us?
- Do you become a customer when you have paid your invoice?
- Does it require repeat purchase to be considered a customer?

I recommend you to do the same exercise in your organization. You will marvel at the multitude of definitions and explanation that will emerge to concepts and terms you have been using for a long time in your budget or planning process.

Thirdly, they as a group (and probably also individually, although that could not be consistently studied in this context) over time developed a considerable skill to reframe.

I will further discuss this last observation. Reframing is a concept related to tame and wicked problems. As you remember, I earlier said that it may take some time to understand that a problem really is a wicked and not a tame one.

Some researchers (e.g. Grint, Fairhurst, Watzlavick) suggest that the crucial capacity here is the ability to reframe, see things differently, and in a new light. Reframing is a creative process, sometimes gradual but equally often sudden and unexpected. It does

[3] A few comments on the discussions related to the problems to solve:

- responsibility for the activity was shared between Group HR and Top Management, as was the process of selecting participants and deciding on format for the meetings.
- the cases were real and had a strategic urgency, but the final decision on implementing the solutions was made by top management, according to the operative (hierarchical) structure.

not necessarily require that anything happens outside the individual– but inside you have shifted the vantage point form where you view the problem. You have replaced the frame within which you tried to understand the issue with another frame or mindset.

Finally, while not being estranged by complexity, these leaders were very capable of making decisions. They did not get lost in procrastination and information gathering; on the contrary, they were capable of voicing alternatives and select one, which they fully supported. Further, their decision-making was not inhibited by any need for consistency. On the contrary, these managers were convinced of the uniqueness of the wicked problem and that the solutions must stand essentially by itself.

As I mentioned, the industrial view on good management has influenced our way of designing everything from incentive models, reporting structures industrial relations etc. in order to support the good managers and leaders. We can easily find ample cases, stories and examples of such leaders and their supporting structures. Solving multidimensional problems however – as discussed above – was found to require another leadership, in a way violating the principles of good industrial management, and where it is more difficult to find good role models – at least if we confine ourselves to look inside the field of business leadership. But what about looking elsewhere?

First we need a somewhat different way of describing the leadership process, not as a matter of efficiency and measurability, but still related to decision-making and action. Richard Normann can provide us with one definition, moving our mind in that direction:

> *The fundamental process of leadership is that of interpreting a (continuously evolving) context, formulating our notions of our own identity and the emerging new contextual logic into dominating ideas which are both descriptive and normative, and then translate these dominating ideas into various realms of action.*
>
> *(Normann, 1972)*

Normann in another book gives this leadership process a name – statesmanship.

> *The leadership process which interprets tension and conflict as data about different reality perceptions and channel them into innovation, I have described as statesmanship […].*
>
> *(Normann 2001)*

Discussing the statesman is not part of the mainstream business leadership discourse; it typically belongs to the realm of political science or perhaps the genre of political biographies. However, let us compare Normann's view of the work of a business leader as a matter of excursing statesmanship with Henry Kissinger's description of the work of the French cardinal Richelieu, who in practice managed France in the 1700-cnetury. Again the notion of analysing, framing and formulating a direction and finally acting stand out.

Three conclusions emerge from Richeloieu´s career.

First, […] a careful analysis of all relevant factors.

Second, […] analyzing and shaping an array of ambiguous, often conflicting pressures into a coherent and purposeful direction.

And, third, he must act at the outer edge of the possible, bridging the gap between his society´s experiences and its aspiration.

(Kissinger, 2014)

Now, going back to the matrix organization, I argue that in order to get a matrix or multidimensional organization to work, you need statesmen and statesmanship on many organizational levels.

My research shows that if this capability is exercised, the hierarchical, functional or otherwise basically one-dimensional organisation can quite successfully solve multi-dimensional issues. In the words of the former CEO of Electrolux, Leif Johansson: ”good management will always take over the structure”. However, *without* it, the most elaborate multidimensional structure will not work.

If this is a challenging proposition, there is some good news: these capabilities can be developed, through for example:

- Constantly focus learning and experience sharing, as complementing measurable results and outcome. To guide organizing processes (also in terms of projects, teams etc.) not only from an efficiency perspective (”how to best solve the problem”) but also from a learning perspective (”support our learning”).

- Strive to use existing platforms for dialogue and sharing. Instead of striving to reduce number of meetings and conferences to be more effective, evaluate the meeting curriculum from a sharing perspective

- Allow mistakes and encourage transparency.

- Reflect the multidimensionality in incentive models etc.

- Develop reporting and control systems in several directions, not only hierarchical and converging, but also vertical and diverging

- Encourage and reward experiments and exploring. Examine the attitude towards decision making – is exploring a problem always considered a form of procrastination

- Move people around inside the organization.

- Be conscious of how you use your internal language – your corporate ”lingo”. Does it help you to formulate and understand a new and different context and to articulate actions? Or does it limit you to reiterate proven solutions?

- And – last but not least – make sure that you are efficient in solving your tame problems. Develop your skill to early identify a wicked problem.

The Challenge

In their article about matrix management from 1990, Sumantra Ghoshal and Christopher Bartlett wrote the following, quoting an unknown manager.

> *[One manager said]: “The challenge is not so much to build a matrix structure as it is to create a matrix in the minds of our managers.”*
>
> *(Bartlett-Ghoshal 1990)*

Reflecting on this quote, I will conclude with a question managers sometimes ask me: Based on your research into the matter, do you think our company should be organized as a matrix, considering our industry, our line of business, our competition or growth model. Would a matrix make us more efficient, agile, resilient and profitable?

More often than not, I am tempted to respond with another question, constituting the true burning platform and litmus test: **Do you have the management to run a matrix? And if the answer is no – how can we best develop that capacity, the “statesmen with a matrix mind”?**

- end -

Want to read more?

Here are some suggestions, including the books and articles I have referred to in the text:

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