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Fire Officer Leadership Strategies for Cost Management

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research paper was to explore leadership strategies fire officers used by fire office leaders to manage costs associated with hazardous operations.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology employed in this study was a qualitative method using a case study design. The participants in this research study comprised 13 randomly selected fire officers from fire stations within a major metropolitan area located in the United States who had 5 or more years hazardous operations experience. In addition to interviews, workplace practices, policies and procedures related to hazardous operations and cost management were analyzed. Limitations of this study include both the sample size, and the geographic area; which impacts the ability to generalize the results of the study.

Findings – Four central themes emerged from the study: servant leadership, partnership, accountability, and creative staffing are crucial strategies to manage costs associated with hazardous operations. The findings of this study further indicate fire officers must distinguish between the most appropriate action for any given situation to achieve the fire department goals and objectives.

Practical Implications – Managing cost effective hazardous operations through sound leadership strategies reduced injuries and saved lives; which result in cost savings in fire departmental budgets, labor costs, and health care costs, which can further support the redirection of funds to critical areas of fire operations.

Originality/Value – The value of identifying leadership strategies related to hazardous operations cost management may reduce injuries, save lives, and ensure adequate budget allocations for fire departments. Social implications include innovative leadership strategies, which may enable fire officers to promote positive social change through saving lives of firefighters and the citizens they serve.

Keywords Fire Officer leadership strategies, Fire operations cost management, Hazardous operations and cost management, Fire department management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Hazardous operations are a primary concern for jurisdictional leaders (Steyn and Niemann, 2014). Fire officers manage hazardous operations daily by minimizing life-threatening situations to the workforce while maximizing benefits to the public (Cohen-Hatton *et al.*, 2015). Personnel assigned to hazardous operations must focus their attention on the operational aspects, and special management strategies are essential to minimizing the possibility of injury or death (Dillard and Layzell, 2014).

Hazardous operations threaten both workforces, and the sustainability of organizations (Almakenzi *et al.*, 2015). In the United States, fire officers receive extensive, world-renowned training for mitigating emergencies, but they do not have the leadership strategies to manage costs. Traditional fire department leadership strategies do not include the leadership and management skills required to manage business-related functions (Rumsey, 2014).

Qualifications to function as a fire department officer requires operational leadership strategies (Mumford *et al.*, 2015). Financial and operational issues affect fire department operations and can lead to layoffs and organization closure (Ihlanfeldt and Mayock, 2014). Command staff training requirements do not exist (Dillard and Layzell, 2014). Specific business training could prepare fire officers for operational success.

The operation of a fire department requires the combined abilities of hazardous operations and business operations (Rumsey, 2014). The lack of leadership strategies may lead to deficiencies in both hazardous and business operations (Chittaro and Buttussi, 2015). Efficient management of the business component of hazardous operations is essential to the performance and survival of the organization (Rumsey, 2014). Further research warranted exploring the leadership strategies for managing hazardous operations costs while reducing injuries, and saving lives.

Research Question

The research question was: What leadership strategies do fire officers use to manage costs associated with hazardous operations?

Research Methodology

The paper explored involved the exploration of the leadership strategies used by fire officers within 13 fire stations experiencing similar types of emergency situations located within city limits of a major metropolitan area located in the United States. In addition, the paper analyzed workplace practices, policies and procedures. The research methodology consisted of establishing a relationship with fire department leadership within a metropolitan area to conduct the study. The senior leadership fire chief(s) were briefed; and approval to conduct the study was granted. The interviews were scheduled based on specific criteria established for participants. The interviews were conducted, and audio recorded using previously established research questions. Upon completion of the interviews, the audio recorded interviews were transcribed; participants confirmed accuracy of the interviews data; thematic analysis to identify the patterned meaning across the dataset; and methodological triangulation which included fire workplace

practices, policies and procedures related to hazardous operations and cost management were reviewed.

Conceptually

This paper used transformational leadership theory (TLT) as the premise for the research study since fire fighters follow their officers through emergency and nonemergency situations. Conceptually, leaders may use TLT as a framework to identify business problems, identify solutions, and find relevant strategies (Banks *et al.*, 2016). Fire officers who apply TLT define the framework for strategy identification from the perspective of leading by example. Antonakis and House (2014) conveyed that leading by example is the basis of framework through the application of TLT. TLT dovetails into key tenets of TL that include fire officers acting as role models motivating employees to perform above expectations working collectively to achieve common goals (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates TLT as applied to exploring fire officer leadership strategies for cost management.



Figure 1. Graphical model of transformational leadership theory as applied to exploring fire officer leadership strategies for cost management.

Literature Review

Fire Officers and Economics of Safety

Fire officers manage fire departments under a unique phenomenon of uncertainty in everyday operations as opposed to the stable environments of traditional businesses (Sienkiewicz-Malyjurek, 2016). Subsequently, managing the costs of hazardous operations requires a cognizant effort and skill with budgeting; so the economics of safety can be costly for both fire departments and the public they serve. For example, in the United States, of the 19,000 reporting municipal governments, public safety resources encompass 40% to 80% of municipal budgets, which increases the likelihood that reductions will affect fire departments in some manner (McFarland and Pagano, 2016; Walters, 2011). Thus, the cost of safety either helps or hinders the service provided by the fire department. The amount of funds available for hazardous

operations determines the level of service a fire department can provide (Light, 2016). One source of competency in fire departments consists of intangible resources, which include knowledge and reputation (Fleming and Zhu, 2009). Providing strategies on a frugal basis assists fire officers in managing costs; however, it may lead to injuries and fatalities, which subsequently affect both financial and nonfinancial aspects of safety in the community; and therefore, leadership strategies which encompass all aspects of hazardous operations cost management become an imperative.

Leadership strategies and hazardous operations cost management

The role of fire officers is an ever-changing dynamic that requires buy-in from all levels, expanding from the traditional mindset of maintaining consistent leadership strategies. In fact, fire officers operate in an environment where every action is in the public's eye (Fleming, 2010; Fleming and Zhu, 2009). Thus, fire officers must encourage staff to consistently follow the operating guidelines and strategies to maintain an effective fire service to their constituents, including cost management. To achieve this mission, fire officers must motivate fire fighters through leading by example; fire leaders must remain motivated and maintain a general balance of their roles to keep fire departments operational (Dillard and Layzell, 2014). Fire officers coach fire fighters to follow operating standards in an ethical fashion including positive reinforcement of operating principles. When fire officers fail to follow procedures, they violate ethical standards and integrity. The Machiavellian concept comes to light where leaders get what they want at any cost by violating standard operating practices and procedures (Eubanks *et al.*, 2012). The Machiavellian concept, and its effect on the workplace and safety, could present mixed perceptions in leadership strategies (Eubanks *et al.*, 2012). Machiavellianism affects leaders and their leadership strategies, competencies, and identities (Eubanks *et al.*, 2012). Thus, it is imperative for fire officers to maintain integrity, and standards, and follow the procedures, thereby reducing injury potential related to hazardous operations.

Stress in a business relates to negative business practices, ethical issues, and hazardous operations cost management (Vardaman *et al.*, 2014). Fire officers experience stress in both emergency and nonemergency situations creating a higher risk for errors resulting in increased cost. Fire officers are under the microscope of the public for each decision rendered in both emergency and nonemergency situations. When Cohen-Hatton *et al.* (2015) researched nine categories of themes associated with success regarding leadership strategies in (a) organizations, (b) visibility, (c) availability, (d) attentiveness, (e), calmness, (f), knowledge, (g) authority, (h) communication, and (i) cooperativeness, the authors determined fire officers experience barriers in every facet of the job – so to ensure leadership success, they must devise leadership strategies to counteract such barriers.

Another important piece of the leadership strategy equation is communication. Communication is important for businesses because the lack of communication leads to problems and misconceptions (Kniffin *et al.*, 2015). Leadership in multi-organizations needs a sense of diplomacy to interact successfully with different personalities (Demiroz and Kapucu, 2012). Communication within the fire department can mean the difference between life and death (Fleming and Zhu, 2009). Communications must be clear with no room for misinterpretation (Borghesi and Gaudenzi, 2012). Safety messages conveyed by leaders during any given

emergency could uncover deficiencies in leadership communication skill that may breakdown in the process (Simola, 2014).

Leadership of an organization involves preparing for the unexpected. Preparedness is a process that fits into the business portion of agencies in both emergency and non-emergency situations (Demiroz and Kapucu, 2012). Domestic preparedness in the United States involving crisis management employs leadership strategies (Mann and Islam, 2015). Fire officers are charged with preparing for both non-emergency and emergency using leadership strategies focusing on cost management (Fleming and Zhu, 2009). Crisis involving the public will most likely involve governmental leadership intervention (Demiroz and Kapucu, 2012).

Leadership in both crisis and non-emergency situations requires sense making. Crisis in the world demonstrated the need for preparedness instead of reactiveness (Mann and Islam, 2015). Leadership in a disaster situation involves taking charge of and influence personnel to understand they will recover from a catastrophe (Deichmann and Stam, 2015). Decision making is one of the most common duties of fire officers (Hardy, and Comfort, 2015). The fire officer's diplomacy in disasters involves leadership strategies that mitigate the situation and manage costs (Cohen-Hatton *et al.*, 2015).

Organizational leaders need experience, training, and motivation to perform at the highest level (von Thiele Schwarz *et al.*, 2016). Fire officers have a difficult challenge of adding business leader skills to fire department skills. Krasuski *et al.* (2012) argued hazardous operations experiencing a transformational period require leaders to take the part of leading and managing their departments as businesses. Leaders possessing or acquiring new leadership strategies perform at a higher level increasing their organization's hazardous operations cost management performance, and bottom line (Iorio and Taylor, 2015).

Role model's leadership strategies

Fire officer's expectations to lead by example enhance safety management within their areas of work. Leaders act as transformational leaders who have the potential of invoking change to the employees in the organization (McCleskey, 2014). Role models should lead by example to stimulate safety by engaging in safety-related activities (Borghesi and Gaudenzi, 2012). Fire officers should serve as the role model leaders to stimulate proper actions of followers promote effective cost management actions (Pilbeam *et al.*, 2016). Leading by example is a leadership strategy that involves hazardous operations leaders possessing the responsibility of attending to the safety needs of the employees of their organization.

The hazardous operations leader discusses with staff their needs regarding workplace safety (Pollack *et al.*, 2017). Lack of attention to the needs of employees sets the stage for poor performance and the employee's perception of managerial trust and integrity (Deinert *et al.*, 2015). Poor performance leads to injuries, which incur additional costs linked to worker's compensation, disability, and death benefits thus reducing the fire department's operating budget. Fire officers earning trust can develop an open dialogue with employees increasing the possibility of safer performance.

The business vision of safety is critical in ensuring that safety goals and objectives achieve a positive outcome in managing hazardous operations (Borghesi and Gaudenzi, 2012). The leadership strategy of leading by example demonstrates a firm commitment from the safety manager to the goals of the business (Luo and van den Brand, 2016). Leadership strategies used by fire officers should provide positive direction for staff encouraging positive safety procedures while remaining cognizant of cost management measures (Fleming, 2010).

Servant Leadership

Fire officers must perform in the same manner as business leaders, developing creative ways to meet budgetary objectives and sustain operational performance (Zashkiani *et al.*, 2011). Hsiao *et al.* (2015) concurred that servant leadership incorporates stewardship for the leader to develop efficiencies of processes thus providing a cost savings. Servant leadership behaviors work in unison with TL as leaders put others first and lead by example (Smith *et al.*, 2016). Russell *et al.* (2015) determined that fire and emergency services staffs held commonly shared servant leadership attributes and traits; and which they suggested further highlighted the need to encourage such on the job attitudes within the profession. A fact, Russell (2016) determined was necessary since "...servant leadership characteristic, constructs, and attributes mimic those found in most emergency services responders" (p. 3).

Based on the findings from this study, we confirmed that servant leadership is a strategy for higher performance; and as suggested by Chiniara and Bentein (2014) a way of life to serve first and the aspiration to lead. Eighty percent of the fire officers participating in this study conveyed their applications of servant leadership in daily operations. For example, servant leadership involves a trickle-down effect originating from the top leadership echelon ending with front-line personnel focusing on behaviors conducive to quality and service (Ling *et al.*, 2016). Empowering and developing people is the key to success accomplished by providing the tools to do the job, coaching employees, and granting autonomy (Birasnav, 2014). Furthermore, Hsiao *et al.* (2015) expressed empowerment, and developing people as a characteristic of servant leadership. Participants (FD 04, 05, 08) described observing past leaders, and that they "applied bits and pieces" based on their leader's success to provide new ideas. As well, other participants such as FD 10 postulated the "contemplation of strategies for efficiently accomplishing projects," which is in line with Reed's (2015) notion that when leaders were viewed as servant leaders, when staff felt empowered, and sought responsibility; and accepted accountability.

"Leading by example and putting the emphasis on others is an important leadership strategy that renders positive end results" according to FD 03; and FD 06. In previously research Reed (2015, p. 77) also noted that "...servant leaders recognize their moral duty to consider organizational impacts on all involved in the emergency. The purpose of their work is to improve the communities in which their organizations are nested". In our study, various participants (FD 02; FD 05; FD 07) asserted that one key to servant leadership is to "look at the big picture and prioritizing benefits versus risks".

Partnership

All participants indicated the use of committees and group strategies to solve problems. As an example, those interviewed noted that "...labor and management committees meet to explore different initiatives for further improvement resulting in a give and take situation. The committee concept, as all participants was a "vital part of the continual partnership within the leadership of the fire department." A clear illustration of partnership with the city finance manager conveyed the success of cost management efforts of the fire department leadership. Participants indicated the inclusion of fire department personnel into committees and partnership groups provides a sense of ownership in the operation increasing morale. Moreover, the participants conveyed the importance of partnerships as a team attitude, meet as a leadership team, and discussing the costs with operational response teams.

Accountability

Marsh (2013) conveyed that rules hold a higher standard of accountability but cannot measure people's integrity to follow rules. Another accountability example expressed was the value of importance of fire protection services and the impact on the community. Temporado (2012) noted that fire service leaders are held accountable at every level for all functions of the fire department. Ghysels and Ozkan (2015) affirmed that analyzing trends of previous expenditures provide a basis or predicting outcomes in the future. The findings from my study confirm partnerships and accountability as a key component in cost management (Anzia and Moe, 2015). Additionally, fire officers manage assigned functional divisions of the fire department and act as the steering arm for partnerships, holding accountability for personnel assigned (Light, 2016). The progress of cost management is a challenge from every level of personnel working in unison for the common good of the fire department (Fleming and Zhu, 2009). The atmosphere in the fire service is changed from past years placing greater emphasis on accountability because of fiscal issues within jurisdictions (Wilson and Grammich, 2015). Various participants posited cities that do not value fire protection services provide reduced services to their citizens as opposed to cities valuing fire protection services prosper. Successful cost management derives from strategies including partnerships from all parties, and accountability to manage the processes (Taylor *et al.*, 2014).

Creative Staffing

Creative staffing is one of the most innovative cost management measures since the 1990s. Cost savings in one area of a fire department budget may allow reallocation of funds to critical line items (Hubrich and Tetlow, 2015). For example, various participants described the creative staffing program as a viable program that meets the needs of staffing and controls the cost of personnel. Leadership strategies have a profound effect on the success of creative staffing primarily with TL leading by example (Antonakis and House, 2014). The creative staffing strategy serves a two-fold process beginning with cost savings, and illustrating fiscal responsibility to municipality leadership (Light, 2016). As well, many of those interviewed asserted the creative staffing model provided flexibility for fire officers to reduce overtime costs and later in the year staff for shortages benefiting employees and the bottom line.

Findings

The overarching research question for this paper was: What leadership strategies do fire officers use to manage costs associated with hazardous operations? The following themes were identified as key attributes to manage hazardous operations costs: (a) servant leadership, (b) partnerships and accountability, and (c) creative staffing.

Theme 1: Servant leadership

The first theme emphasized from the study was the concept of servant leadership. Eighty percent of participants conveyed the concept of putting others first as opposed to own needs. For example, the fire officer viewing the world with an open mind and willingness to work with others will better serve the community. The participants of this study concurred that serving others first creates a sense of trust for both fire department personnel and the community. Fire officers are trained as incident commanders but lack business management skills (Fleming, 2010). So, as noted by Zashkiani *et al.* (2011), fire officers must perform in the same manner as business leaders, developing creative ways to manage hazardous incidents to meet budgetary objectives and sustain operational performance. Hsiao *et al.* (2015) concurred that servant leadership incorporates stewardship for the leader to develop efficiencies of processes thus providing a cost savings. Knowing the bottom line first, is imperative for cost management for the servant leader to prioritize items needed and maintain fiscal responsibility.

Servant leadership behaviors work in unison with transformational leadership as leaders put others first and lead by example (Reed, 2015; Russell *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2016). Interviewees described observing past leaders, and applying bits and pieces of their success provides new ideas. In addition, some interviewees posited the contemplation of strategies for efficiently accomplishing projects. Leading by example and putting the emphasis on others is an important leadership strategy that renders positive end results. As well, some of those interviewed asserted that one key to servant leadership is to look at the big picture and prioritizing benefits versus risks.

Based on the findings from this study, servant leadership is a strategy for higher performance. In fact, eighty percent of the fire officers participating in this study conveyed their applications of servant leadership in daily operations. For example, servant leadership involves a trickle-down effect originating from the top leadership echelon ending with front-line personnel focusing on behaviors conducive to quality and service (Ling *et al.* 2016). Empowering and developing people is the key to success accomplished by providing the tools to do the job, coaching employees, and granting autonomy (Birasnav, 2014).

Theme 2: Partnerships and accountability

The second theme noted by participants was the need for partnerships and accountability. One hundred percent of the participants indicated the use of committees and group to support the development of strategies to solve problems. The committee concept conveyed by 100% of the interviewees' is a clear illustration of how partnerships with the city officials created opportunities for inclusion of fire department personnel into city budget finance committees; which further provided a sense of ownership of the budget allocation process. Moreover, the

participants conveyed the importance of partnerships as a team attitude, meet as a leadership team, and discussing the costs associated with operational hazardous response teams.

Participants revealed the experience for accountability for both personal and organizational situations. Moreover, participants expressed the importance of cost management related to order reduction strategies to control in stock supplies; and maintaining current stock via an inventory system. Marsh (2013) conveyed that rules hold a higher standard of accountability but cannot measure people's integrity to follow rules. Another accountability example identified was the value of fire protection and hazardous management services in relation to perceived community value. Temporado (2012) noted that fire service leaders are held accountable at every level for all functions of the fire department. In fact, the majority of those interviewed stated city officials, which do not value fire protection services provide reduced services to their citizens; whereas those city officials who value fire protection services provide increased services.

Outcome based budgeting emerged as part of the partnership and strategy theme. Sixty percent of the participants described outcome based budgeting as a strategy of fiscal accountability projected as a guiding principle to current and future success of a fire department. Ghysels and Ozkan (2015) affirmed that analyzing trends of previous expenditures provided a basis or predicting outcomes in the future. The participants noted the key to outcome based budgeting is to forecast the possibility of various events that may occur and to forward plan five to ten years in advance. Participants explained accountability as prioritizing the fire department's needs based on participatory management with key fire staff personnel on a regular basis to ensure desired outcomes.

The findings in this paper confirmed partnerships and accountability as a key component in cost management (Anzia and Moe, 2015). Additionally, fire officers manage assigned functional divisions of the fire department and act as the steering arm for partnerships, holding accountability for personnel assigned (Light, 2016). The progress of cost management is a challenge from every level of personnel working in unison for the common good of the fire department (Fleming and Zhu, 2009). The atmosphere in the fire service has experience changed from past years placing greater emphasis on accountability because of fiscal issues within jurisdictions (Wilson and Grammich, 2015). Successful cost management derives from strategies including partnerships from all parties, and accountability to manage the processes (Taylor *et al.*, 2014).

Theme 3: Creative staffing

The third emerging theme emphasized the participants' experience with creative staffing. Seventy percent of the participants identified creative staffing as one of the most innovative cost management measures since the 1990s. For example, most interviewees described the creative staffing program as a viable program that meets the needs of staffing and controls the cost of personnel. Seventy percent of participants revealed the long-term effects of the creative staffing rely on continuous monitoring. The future consideration consisted of long-term, six months to one year out, identifying shortfalls, and overstaffing issues, opportunities to assist fire department leadership with future hiring. When staffing shortage exists, personnel that furloughed earlier in the year can work back the furloughed time maintaining an effective cost

management model. The creative staffing system management was viewed as a fair and equitable environment for both rank and leadership staff.

The findings from this study support the creative staffing model as a viable cost management strategy (Fleming and Zhu, 2009). Cost savings in one area of a fire department budget may allow reallocation of funds to critical line items (Hubrich and Tetlow, 2015). Leadership strategies have a profound effect on the success of creative staffing primarily with transformational leadership; especially when leading by example (Antonakis and House, 2014; Reed, 2015; Russell *et al.*, 2015).). The creative staffing strategy serves a two-fold process beginning with cost savings, and illustrating fiscal responsibility to municipality leadership (Light, 2016).

Business Practice

The themes from this paper link the peer-reviewed literature to the business practice. Cost management is a vital part of survival for public safety organizations (Anzia and Moe, 2014). Ruetzler *et al.* (2014) posited safety related services are the first to face budget reductions in fiscally distressed times. The creative staffing strategy affirms the financial stability of the fire department thus reducing the possibility of staff or budget reductions. Seventy percent of the fire officers in this study revealed their flexibility to render daily operational staffing decisions and operate within the budget.

The partnering and accountability theme link the literature review with the findings of this study relating to working in groups, committees, and developing partnerships within city administration. Partnerships are vital to business relationships when managing costs related to operations (Taylor *et al.*, 2014). Van der Voet (2013) identified operational management accountability regimes provides efficiency in service; which is subsequently accomplished through effective leadership strategies. One hundred percent of the fire officers in this study affirmed working as partners brings people together and increases accountability.

Creative staffing links the literature review with the findings of this paper by addressing leadership strategies and cost management. In the fire service, there is operational uncertainty every day not knowing the financial impact of the next call (Sienkiewicz-Malyjurek, 2016). In this research study, creative staffing reduced costs of overtime and provides a work back option to cover open positions as and when required. Since cost management is paramount to the success of fire departments, fire officers need strategies to accomplish this task (Smith *et al.*, 2016). Operational effectiveness consists of leaders developing innovative strategies to overcome unforeseen events that impact the budget (Zashkiani *et al.*, 2011).

Applications Hazardous Cost Management

The findings of this paper illustrate a focus on fire department business practices using various leadership strategies which contributes to the overall financial success of the organization (Kasdan, 2015). The identified themes from this study include (a) servant leadership, (b) partnerships and accountability, and (c) creative staffing that applies to positive solutions of fire department business practices. The significance of this study is in the findings that suggest

innovative business practices contributing to effective leadership strategies and cost management for the fire service (McCleskey, 2014).

The findings from this paper also add to the body of knowledge, 80% of the participants in this study identified that servant leadership is effective since it enables fire officers to place others first while at the same time leading by example and achieving the goals of the fire department (Reed, 2015; Russell *et al.*, 2015; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, this study adds to the body of knowledge identifying creative staffing, partnerships and accountability throughout the fire department business practices as having a profound effect resulting from servant leadership (Smith *et al.*, 2016). The findings of this study indicated fire officers must distinguish between the most appropriate action for any given situation to achieve the fire department goals and objectives (Van der Voet, 2013). Several interviewees noted fire department practices of public service first and foremost is a community oriented approach. Serving others through high quality of care and operating within the budget is the key to efficiency.

Implications for Social Change

Indications from this study reflect the positive effect servant leadership, partnerships and accountability along with creative staffing have on the overall fire department business outcomes (Yucel *et al.*, 2014). The social improvements identified in this paper encourages working in unison to improve fire services to constituents. Moreover, the social benefits of these strategies increase value to the fire department services to citizens served by saving lives and property which benefits the overall community.

Recommendations for Further Research

In the future, municipal budgets may involve reductions at every level requiring fire officers to develop innovative leadership strategies for managing costs to remain cost effective. Fire officers must select the appropriate leadership strategy for achieving the goals of the fire department and manage costs. When a servant leadership strategy is used daily by putting others first, it enables fire officers to lead by example, it enables fire officers and city officials to create partnerships and committees to meet organizational objectives creating increased accountability among fire offices and city leaders and further affirms the importance of partnerships with all ranks in the fire department and city to ensure accountability and ownership to achieve organizational goals associated with the demands of its citizens .

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