Leadership Development

A Senior Leader Case Study

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Brig Gen Thomas Sharpy, former director of the Air Force General Officer Management Office, identified the need for an internal assessment of the US Air Force's leadership development process, also known as the developmental team (DT), to determine its effectiveness in creating excellent leaders to meet current and future needs. DTs are part of the Air Force's overarching force-development

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program, a requirement-driven initiative to train and educate the service's active duty, reserve, and civilian personnel through a purposeful, career-long process of personal and professional development.[1] Air Force leaders use force development to engender organizational and occupational competencies through education, skills training, and practical experience. According to the service, DTs are its conduit that aligns force-development systems with frameworks and organization policy; moreover, the service's force developers use them to generate career paths for personnel.[2] DT membership includes a general officer as the chair, a career field manager, an assignments team representative, and other senior officer (or civilian equivalent) stakeholders from the Air Staff or major command headquarters.

The 2011 DT survey findings (table 1) indicate that many field grade officers do not understand the value of the DT program.[3] Since previous studies were downward focused, the present study sought to understand how senior leaders believe that the Air Force's DTs guide the development of officers to meet strategic objectives. This exploration involved a review of literature as well as online questionnaires completed by members of the DTs. The *big picture* provided by the study might enable Air Force leaders to make adjustments to the program where and when necessary to produce more effective officers and, ultimately, to create a more competent and productive military force. This article explores and addresses areas of potential improvement for an enhanced Air Force DT process that will be better postured to groom senior officers to meet or exceed the DT program's objectives.

Table 1. Low-level agreement rates among field grade officers regarding Air Force developmental teams (2011)

Agree	*Condition*
25%	Strongly agreed or agreed that their DT helps them plan their career path
39%	Strongly agreed or agreed that they know when their DT meets
27%	Strongly agreed or agreed that they are aware of the personnel that comprise their DT
29%	Strongly agreed or agreed that they have adequate opportunity to present information to their DT
12%	Strongly agreed or agreed that their DT communicates directly with them
19%	Strongly agreed or agreed that DT vectors help them achieve short-term career-development goals

Source: Lt Col Paul Valenzuela, analysis briefing presented to the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel, subject: 2011 Development Team Officer Experience and Satisfaction Survey, 26 April 2012.

Graduates of ineffective or inadequate leadership development programs adversely affect many organizations and are often accompanied by greater operating costs.[4] Effective leaders are typically a key foundation for organizational success and growth, making the need for mature leadership development programs a problem that both private and public sectors must address aggressively.[5] A major finding from a US Army survey indicated that 39 percent of leaders considered *developing others* the lowest-rated core competency.[6] Between 2007 and 2011, the Air Force conducted baseline and follow-up studies on the DTs. The authors of these studies examined service members' understanding of the program, not its ability to develop leaders who meet strategic objectives. The specific problem is a lack of analysis designed to determine whether or not the DTs meet the service's current and future leadership needs.

The authors' qualitative case study explored the influence of the DTs' processes on Air Force field grade officers worldwide to determine

the efficacy of those processes for identifying, selecting, and/or developing leaders who meet the service's requirements. The Air Force defines the DT process as the conduit among its policy, force-development systems, and organizational frameworks used to generate career paths for personnel.[7] DT representatives in the form of general officers or their delegates completed 14 questionnaires to contribute feedback to the study, whose findings might allow the application of current business theories and practices, as they pertain to leadership development, to the Air Force. An improved leadership development program might help the US military protect the American people and maintain *regional stability*.[8] Consequently, the study posed the following central research question: *How effective are the Air Force's DTs at developing leaders to meet current and future needs?* The next section explores that query.

Research Framework and Applications to Professional Practice

The top 5 percent of companies with effective leadership practices dedicate twice as much effort as other businesses to leadership development, a clear indication that the latter is a factor in organizational success.[9] The current study of the effectiveness of Air Force DTs examined the processes of a leadership development program within the service and led to a transferable business model of leadership development. This model could be utilized by leaders of private or public organizations to conduct self-assessments of their respective leadership development programs (fig. 1 and table 2).

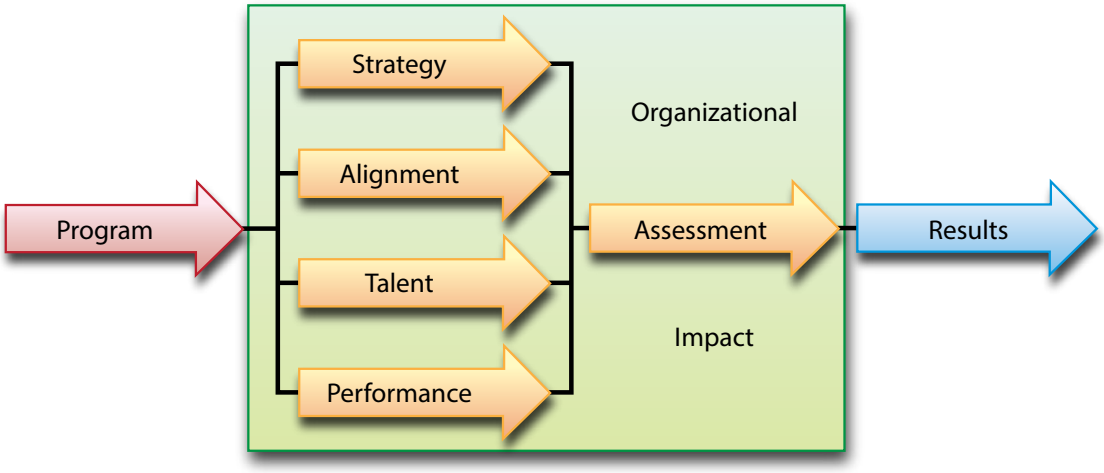

Figure 1. Leader-Input Framework for Evaluation (LIFE)

Table 2. Investigative questions to support the LIFE model

Element	*Investigative Question*
Strategy	How does (development program) posture (or fail to posture) leaders to meet organizational objectives?
Objective Alignment	How do the objectives of (development program) align (or fail to align) with the organization's strategic objectives?
Talent Management	How does (development program) adequately posture (or fail to posture) officer talent capable of filling talent gaps within the organization?
Performance Measurement	How does (development program) measure (or fail to measure) leaders' past performance when determining internal moves, developmental education, and leadership positions?
Assessment	How effective (or ineffective) is (development program) at assessing the results of its graduates to ensure they meet organizational objectives?
Impact on Environment	How does the (development program) affect (or not affect) the overall organizational environment?

The LIFE model in figure 1 stems from conceptualizing and integrating elements of leadership development in the work of Stephen Cohen, Lisa Gabel, Kate Harker, and Ethan Sanders, as well as Air Force elements of organizational development.[10] Combining these elements with the descriptions of each theme (table 2) allows program developers, assessors, and executives to easily understand and adapt the model. Further, it can contribute to business practice by giving leaders of public and private organizations a framework for conducting a self-assessment of their leadership development program. The LIFE model could help them determine if their leadership development program (a) is aligned with the organization's strategy, (b) develops leaders who become transferrable across the organization as they become more senior, (c) adequately measures and assesses performance of students and graduates, and (d) does not harm the organization. Such a tool offers an inexpensive alternative to hiring consultants, especially during a period when rising fees curtail the use of auditors.[11]

Senior Leader Insight into the Developmental Team Process

The authors employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the effectiveness of DT processes by asking members of the teams to assess their own program, comparing it with the framework used to establish the structure of the questionnaire. Of the 20 DTs contacted, 14 DT representatives provided feedback concerning their respective team (fig. 2). The 47 percent response rate more than quadrupled the expected 10.5 percent average for questionnaires.[12] The unusually high response rate, coupled with the rich detail provided by the respondents, yielded a large amount of qualitative data for analysis.

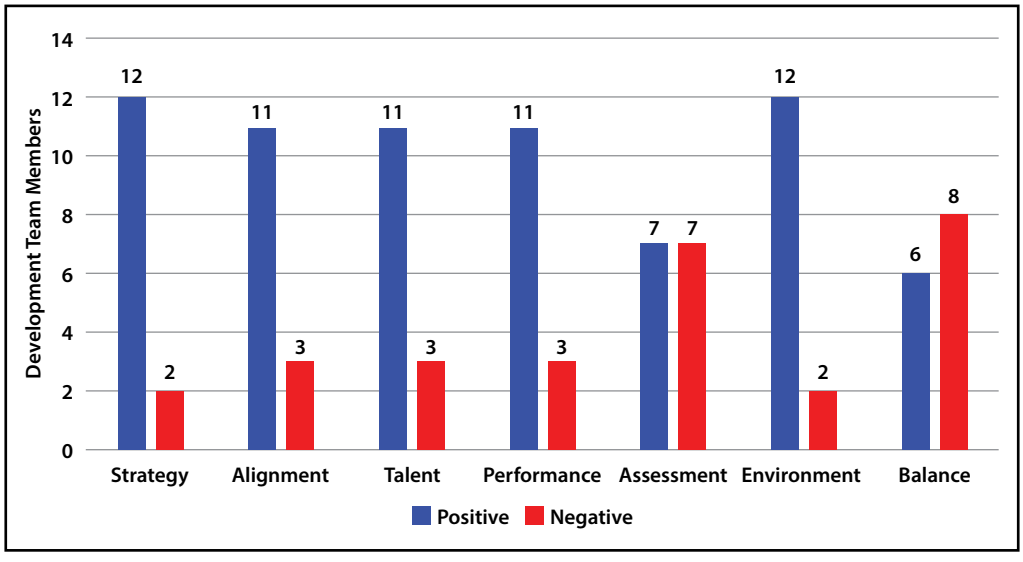

Figure 2. Frequencies of positive and negative responses for each theme

Theme One: Strategy

The study found a strong consensus among participants that the DTs developed leaders to meet the Air Force's current and future needs. The most frequently cited conduit for strategic development, *assignment selection*, was mentioned by all participants, followed by *developmental education*. Three of the participants also mentioned the use of *command selection* as a means of developing leaders to meet the service's strategic requirements. Eighty-six percent of the participants, as experts in the developmental process, responded that their vectors produce well-rounded officers who mature into leaders capable of meeting military and national strategic demands. One of the individuals specifically described *how* those vectors do/do not meet strategic objectives through deliberate placement; however, the respondent felt that the DTs were not vectoring officers to the most critical places to align with national strategic requirements. Note the following specific comments of the participants:

- "[The DT postures leaders to meet the Air Force's strategic objectives] through vectoring and development, school selection, and command selection."
- "Based on guidance received, the DT adjusts vectoring to meet overall strategic needs."
- "Vectors are designed to mature individuals to be future Air Force leaders . . . [instead of] experts in a given career field."
- "I don't believe the DT's are very good at reacting to national strategic objectives. The department recently determined that cyber is a priority in the national security strategy, yet the USAF is staffing US Cyber Command below requirements."

Theme Two: Objective Alignment

The study elicited mixed responses on how DT objectives aligned with Air Force objectives, but all participants agreed that they were nevertheless aligned. In 79 percent of their remarks, respondents felt that the objectives of their specific DT aligned with their career-field objectives first and, in doing so, automatically somehow aligned with bigger Air Force objectives. Participant no. 8 was very clear on how a career-field-specific focus meets such objectives, but no. 10 expressed grave concern about the lack of standardization among different career fields. The practice of sending officers to multiple commands in some career fields as opposed to just one command was a major concern because of the imbalance it creates in the officers' records as they compete for promotion.

- "The DT objectives align with the career field first and the greater USAF strategic objectives second."
- "I feel the DTs meet the [big Air Force] intent. Their requirements flow down as readiness taskings or as the chief's priorities, and we ensure we meet/fill those requirements."

- "DTs are designed to maximize capabilities of all Airmen so the service can provide air, space, and cyberspace power to support US national security. This is right out of the force development instruction 36-2640 [Air Force Instruction 36-2640, *Executing Total Force Development*, 16 December 2008]. I believe our DT is pretty effective at developing officers that have the breadth and depth to maximize their capability as senior officers."

Theme Three: Talent Management

A review of data collected about the talent-management theme yielded a 79 percent positive indication that the program effectively developed officers with the talent to fill gaps throughout the organization should they need to be moved around. Some participants clearly described how their respective DTs produce well-rounded leaders through a mixture of tactical, operational, and strategic assignments within and outside their field; a few others specifically responded that their teams developed officers primarily to support their career field. The remaining respondents indicated that their career field DT developed officers using career-field-specific manpower positions but also provided career-broadening opportunities to selected officers to make them better rounded. In one instance, a participant described how personal bias built into the DT process interferes with the development of qualified candidates.

- "The DT will meet the career field objectives first while broadening officers for other USAF strategic priorities."
- "Our officers are pretty universal. We often transition between operations, training, and support assignments as we develop through the ranks. By the time they are midlevel colonels, the officers have the full-spectrum perspective of the service and are now usable across many positions."
- "On the negative side, personal knowledge of individuals has on occasion interfered with the progress and advancement of otherwise qualified individuals."

- "The DT has been able to release officers for leadership opportunities . . . [and] create a well-rounded officer . . . [who can] fill USAF gaps."

Theme Four: Performance Measurement

The 79 percent of participants who responded positively to the performance-measurement question described the same process for the measurement of officers' past performance and their potential to serve in more demanding positions. Each response included remarks about a complete records review consisting of performance evaluations, assignment history, awards and decorations, and discussion among group members who might have personal experience working with a particular officer. Every respondent felt that the performance-measurement process employed by the DTs was sufficient to realize the teams' objectives. In a few cases, participants representing a smaller career field were less convinced that their recommendations to command selection boards held much weight since they had their own cross-functional boards to choose from before going to the DT for input. Two individuals thought that the performance of officers working outside their comfort zone in career-broadening positions should carry more weight toward their potential as future leaders and that the DT functional reviewers should not resent them.

- "[The DTs measure an officer's past performance via an] in-depth review of officer records by all DT voting participants. Factors like previous assignments, OPRs [officer performance reports], decorations, senior officer recommendations, and timing are considered in the decision process."
- "This is a pretty basic process that occurs at almost every type of USAF board."
- "The boards where I was able to attend and/or lead always measured the complete records of candidates for advancement."

- "[I have seen my DT show] contempt for those performing outside of their functional area."

Theme Five: Assessment

Only 50 percent of the participants agreed that the Air Force's DT semiannual meetings afford them adequate opportunity to track the progress of previously vectored officers to assess their decisions. Smaller DTs appear to have fewer problems with assessment than do the larger teams because of the more easily manageable size of their career fields. The remaining respondents believed that the shifting composition of team membership from session to session prevents DTs from adequately assessing progress. Two individuals directly stated that the teams do not conduct an assessment of past decisions.

- "We have a small career field, so we are better able to track the individual."
- "I do not know of any deliberate process used to backward-assess."
- "The boards are not always suited to reassess the success or failures of the decisions previously made. Most of the time, the members have been switched out, and previous recommendations and their basis are unknown."
- "[Assessment is] probably the weakest area in the design of the DT process."
- "This is a limiting factor. Measures (internal to the career field) are now being put in place to reassess progress."

Theme Six: Impact on the Organizational Environment

Only 14 percent of the respondents felt that the DTs negatively affected the Air Force; the remainder believed otherwise. In one case, a participant expressed initial concern about the potentially adverse effect that DTs would have on an officer's senior leadership. The same person expressed his alignment toward the DTs once he witnessed how

they benefited the service. As senior officers in that field of practice, many participants felt that the DTs included the most suitable leaders to make recommendations on the future path of more junior officers. Several also claimed that the teams, command screening boards, and senior raters all worked well together to create an atmosphere conducive to effective mentorship of the officer being evaluated.

- "DT officers should be in the best position to direct the path of the officers in their career field."
- "I initially worried about the power the DT would have over the senior raters at each wing and major command, but I am now a believer of the DT system."
- "The Air Force Personnel Center relies on DTs to make sound decisions and influence processes, and their determinations are generally taken as gospel."
- "The DT's feedback should allow mentorship to be more focused. By giving an honest assessment and actionable goals, members should know where they stand relative to their peers. This should stimulate performance across the larger Air Force."

Theme Seven: Effect on Organizational Balance

A clear lack of standardization across the various DTs was evident in responses to the custom question, developed for Headquarters Air Force Force Development Integration Division (AF/A1DI), concerning organizational balance. Air Force leadership should take note of the fact that 57 percent of the respondents commented on a lack of balance in how the DTs functioned. Only two acknowledged the existence of a check-and-balance system; the rest were either unsure or said it was dysfunctional. Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, former Air Force chief of staff, expressed the importance of uniformly knowing the standards, applying them consistently, and nonselectively enforcing them; however, the DTs do not appear to meet those criteria.[13]

- "Senior raters select commanders from command lists developed during commanders' boards held at the Air Force Personnel Center. Senior raters still determine who gets DPs [definitely promote] for promotion, so all of these processes complement each other."
- "The DT shouldn't be a training experience for the leader, and the lack of more senior leadership (general officer or civilian equivalent) can be a detriment as well. I remember attending one DT where our DT chair was a GS-15 while the DT across the hall was a two-star general. I think you can appreciate the inequality."
- "There do not appear to be checks and balances."
- "I don't know."
- "I don't know that there is a check and balance at the Air Force Pentagon level."

Summary of Findings

According to the results of management-level review of the DT process, the Air Force's DTs meet strategic objectives and are aligned with the strategic needs of the service, Department of Defense, and United States. DT objectives also align with higher-level strategic needs as clarified in Air Force Instruction 36-2640, *Executing Total Force Development*.[14] DT chairs, career field managers, panel members, and assignments officers work cooperatively to posture officers throughout their careers to gain the experience, breadth, and depth necessary to become senior leaders capable of filling talent gaps across the organization. A thorough review of officer performance reports, past positions, awards, decorations, and senior leader recommendations is integral to the success of the DT process; moreover, it is standardized among the DTs. The benefits that the current DT process brings to the service's organizational environment far exceed any negative effects. The processes have gained the confidence of most of the people who oversee the program. They agree that, as the experts in their field, DTs are the

appropriate entity to influence the careers of the more junior officers that they develop.

Currently the Air Force's teams have neither a standardized nor an effective way of assessing the results of their decisions, a situation that might prove detrimental to the future of the program. DTs need to recognize poor choices of the past to (a) prevent repeating the same decisions in the future and/or (b) correct previous decisions. The small size of the service's force development section might play a role in the lack of standardization across the DTs. The 57 percent negative response rate regarding balance and standardization across the DTs clearly indicates a problem.

It is important to note that the results of this case study are based on feedback provided by the DT board members. The findings do not necessarily agree with the authors' opinion regarding the effectiveness of the DT. Furthermore, a sister study that chose to explore the DT process from a customer perspective (e.g., officers affected by the DT) might reveal different results. In a discussion about the project, AF/A1DI expressed concern about the systematic threats generated when the teams are administered by specific career fields rather than by the service as a whole. A 2011 survey confirmed that apprehension when it revealed a great deal of confusion from Air Force officers regarding the DTs.[15] Previous studies by the RAND Corporation on DTs contradict the opinions expressed above by the teams' board members.[16] During the aforementioned research, assignments officers felt that some DTs build records (e.g., single-unit retrieval formats) instead of leaders while others misuse or misunderstand the vector process and intent altogether.[17]

Implications for Social Change

In an empirical study, Lawrence Korb, P. W. Singer, Heather Hurlburt, and Robert Hunter determined that the future security of the United States relies on a smarter military developed through educa-

tion.[18] Indeed, the military plays an important role in the nation's economic, political, social, and cultural prosperity.[19] The foregoing discussion highlights an important element of leader development, but education alone does not make a good leader; it should be coupled with practical training, mentoring, and experience as well. Gary Yukl, Jennifer George, and Gareth Jones emphasized the importance of organizational leaders to the survival and prosperity of their organization.[20] As a primary component of national defense, US air superiority also depends upon educated leaders to ensure the continuation and well-being of the Air Force and contribute to the future stability of the United States and its international allies. The Air Force could use the findings and recommendations of this study to improve the quality of its force-development program, resulting in better educated, trained, and experienced leaders to guide the organization.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the findings of the study, we recommend the following to address areas of the DT process that require the most attention. These recommendations are specific to the Air Force's DTs and may or may not be transferrable to other organizations with deficiencies in their leadership-development process in similar areas.

Theme Five: Assessment

Since the 1900s, program assessment has been a cornerstone of organizational success.[21] Assessment connects what leaders of an organization set out to achieve with what they actually accomplish. The Air Force must develop a better way for DTs, especially its larger ones, to assess actions that determine if the teams attained their goals and that identify those they failed to do so.[22]

One option for assessment involves duplicating the program used by Air Education and Training Command to assess technical-training graduates. The process entails submitting brief surveys to gaining su-

pervisors that include questions about the quality of the graduate and their level of satisfaction with the qualifications and leadership ability of the officer vectored to them by the DT. A second or complementary option is a self-assessment questionnaire given to the officer vectored by the DT. Both options could remain anonymous and/or confidential to protect the career of the officer yet still provide feedback to the DTs on their decision. If completed in tandem, these two methods would offer a 360-degree, or multisource, feedback mechanism for Air Force leadership on the effectiveness of the DTs and indicate areas for improvement, if applicable. Survey distribution could be easily managed and less costly than using internal tracking or hiring outside auditors/contractors to conduct assessments on behalf of the Air Force.

A third option would take the form of a more deliberate, internal tracking of an officer's progress through comprehensive evaluation of performance during a vectored assignment that would immediately identify placement errors and possible reasons for them. This option would prove more taxing on a program that has already been downsized, and current government budget cuts would likely prevent its implementation. Some career fields plan to develop an internal assessment method such as the one described. If the aforementioned internal assessment method is successful, then AF/A1DI could explore the transferability of the method for implementation consideration across all DTs.

Theme Seven: Effect on Organizational Balance

The DT oversight office has expressed concern that the lack of standardization and balance across career-field-focused DTs might adversely affect the larger Air Force. To investigate this apprehension, we introduced a final subquestion designed to explore standardization among the various DTs and determine the effect of those teams on organizational balance.

Because the results reflected a lack of standardization among the various DTs, the service's Force Development Integration Division

could benefit by concentrating on resolving the standardization issue. A study by Liv Langfeldt, Bjørn Stensaker, Lee Harvey, Jeroen Huisman, and Don Westerheijden recommends peer review in the form of observers as a method of quality assurance to help identify shortfalls and standardize processes.[23] They note that most processes are an interrelated mixture of professional judgments and standardized guidelines.[24] In some cases, elements left to the judgment of the executors could have instead been made a part of standardized processes. Because the Air Force's DTs might have the same problem, force-development observers that frequent the various teams might improve the latter's standardization. Such an option would add personnel to the force-development section of the Air Staff and more travel funds to support the observation efforts.

Summary and Conclusions

The authors' in-depth qualitative case study identified seven themes for examining the effectiveness of the Air Force's DT process from the perspective of a program implementer. The benefits provided by this research are twofold. First, it serves as a validated source of information for Air Force officers affected by the DT, allowing them to understand the views of their senior leaders. Armed with such data, they can support or drive change to the process through detailed, constructive feedback to their respective functional community leaders. Second, Air Force leaders can utilize findings from the analysis of data within each theme to identify, diagnose, and address areas for improving or enriching the DT program. Changes to the program would require additional funds and/or manpower for AF/A1DI. Our review of professional and academic literature pertaining to leadership development revealed a direct relationship between enriched leadership improvement programs and value-added organizational effectiveness. By addressing areas of potential improvement, the Air Force can produce an enhanced DT process that will be better postured to groom senior officers who meet or exceed the program's objectives. ✪

Notes

1. See Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2640, *Executing Total Force Development*, 16 December 2008, http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a1/publication/afi36-2640/afi36-2640_(certified_current)).pdf.
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14. See note 1.
15. Valenzuela, analysis briefing.
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20. Gary Yukl, Jennifer M. George, and Gareth R. Jones, *Leadership: Building Sustainable Organizations* (New York: Custom Publishing, 2009), 550.
21. Kerry A. Bunker and Stephen L. Cohen, "Evaluating Organizational Training Efforts: Is Ignorance Really Bliss?," *Training and Development* 32, no. 8 (August 1978): 4–5.
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24. Ibid., 391.

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