

Defining Your Performance Pipeline

The Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009 has provided compelling evidence for why organizations need a performance pipeline—as well as evidence that many companies lacked such a pipeline during this massive economic downturn. Consider the following questions and whether you could have answered them then—and now:

- Do you know what every leader in your organization is trying to achieve today; do you have a convenient way to find out?
- Are all critical results assigned?
- Are requirements for full performance clear to every leader?
- Is every leader working at the level to which he or she is assigned?
- Is the right work being done in the right way?
- Do you know which leaders are inhibiting the performance of the people who report to them?
- Are you clear about your own role?

Over the last several years and especially during the financial tumult, I found that many leaders couldn't answer these questions. It seemed that no one knew what was really getting done. While companies may be able to avoid these questions during periods of growth and economic stability, they can't ignore them during any

type of crisis or any significant period of change. As observed in the Introduction, we live in extremely volatile times; even if companies emerging from the Global Financial Crisis are doing well, they are likely to face many other challenges around the corner. If they are not able to answer these questions, they will struggle with this challenge.

Facilitating answering these questions for leaders has been my mission in recent years, and it has motivated me to define the Performance Pipeline.

Reflect on your answers to these questions. If your answer to any of them is no, you need a performance pipeline to help you get to a yes. Goals and KPIs (key performance indicators) aren't enough, because they don't encompass all leadership, management, or relationship results. The budget and the strategy aren't reliable indicators of what is being done today—in fact, they are usually misinterpreted or not guiding the work for other reasons. When this is realized, it provides a strong incentive to implement the Pipeline process.

Yet how do you implement it? At first blush, the need to define all results at each leadership level may feel like an overwhelming task. Let me assure you, it's eminently doable, as long as you follow a tested process and benefit from the experiences of those who have gone before you.

The Performance Pipeline process consists of the following six steps:

- Defining the purpose—being clear about what outcome you want
- Collecting the data—finding out what's really getting done, or not getting done but should be
- Sorting and codifying the data—organizing data in a useful way
- Defining the results to be delivered at each layer and the standards for measuring those results

- Validating the standards—getting leaders to agree
- Allowing some flexibility—allowing different groups to adapt the standards in order to reflect specific needs

I'll next discuss each of these six process steps in detail, referring also to examples in Tool 1 at the end of the book, which should make it easier to understand and use the information provided. And I'll include boxes, "Lessons Learned," which will share the knowledge that comes from hard experience—my own as well as the hundred or so companies that have used this Pipeline process. In fact, let's begin with the first and one of the most important lessons.

Lessons Learned

Most leadership performance problems can be traced to the vertical structure

The questions at the beginning of this chapter relate to organization, and organization is the *black hole* of business. Great effort (energy in) seems to produce little improvement (nothing out). Almost all of the effort goes into the horizontal structure—deciding whether to organize around customers or functions or geography or products or business units is the great debate. There are only a few choices for the horizontal structure. While the horizontal structure is important, the vertical structure is where the real problems reside. Gaps between layers due to managers not managing, overlaps resulting from micromanagement, doing lower-level work at higher layers, and defining lower-level jobs too narrowly create performance problems at many companies. These vertical problems are close to infinite in number and deserve much more attention. Not only do they hinder performance; they also block transparency and hurt leadership development.

As you may have suspected by this point, thinking of the Performance Pipeline as an organization model for distributing work is appropriate. It distributes work from top to bottom, from strategy to low-level tasks. To get full value, you should develop your company's own unique version and not just use a generic version or copy one from another company. The process for developing your company's unique model is actually quite simple. A small team of people can complete it in about ten work days if they have a basic knowledge of the company, the business, and the work being done, as well as some experience in structured interviewing techniques.

You don't have to reinvent the wheel. If you want to design a performance pipeline to fit your organization, you can benefit from the methodology I've used in the last twenty years of practice. The essence of this methodology are the six process steps just bulleted. Let's look at each of these steps in detail, thinking about the lessons learned regarding these steps and how you can apply these lessons in your design.

Defining the Purpose

Companies that have made the most progress in creating and using performance pipelines were clear at the outset about why they were doing it. So before you do anything else, decide what business outcomes or benefits you want the model to deliver. It will help in choosing the right work and setting appropriate standards. From companies I've worked with, here are some examples of their purpose in creating a performance pipeline:

- Moving more authority and ownership for results to lower levels (mining)
- Improving the development of Country Business Managers (fast-moving consumer goods)

- Enabling expansion to new geographies or countries (software, lodging)
- Changing the focus and clarifying the expected contribution of all leaders (transportation)
- Transforming the company (consumer goods)
- Improving leadership development (construction, financial services)
- Facilitating cost reduction (pharmaceuticals)

Other purposes are fine. The key is that you're clear about your purpose when you reach the validation phase. And since many people will be interviewed during the data collection phase, they will need to hear why you are doing it.

Before you begin, spend time thinking about and discussing what you would like to change or improve about how your business operates, and/or the work of your leaders, in order to improve your business results or your company's success. Consider what is and isn't getting done at each leadership layer separately and collectively. Your performance pipeline can be used to assign work that isn't getting done, provide emphasis to an area needing improvement, move work done to lower layers, and provide more challenge in the day-to-day work to help leaders develop.

For your organization to function at a high level, the layers have to be connected, not gapped and not overlapped. Changes at one layer will affect the layers immediately above and below because of supervisory requirements above and response requirements below. Changes in accountability ripple up and down, so if you change one layer it affects all the other layers. Don't limit your thinking to only one layer. With a well-defined purpose, you will naturally plan with multiple layers in mind; you can link each specific layer to the overall purpose and minimize gaps and overlaps.

Example

I was asked to help a fast-moving consumer goods company develop more effective Business General Managers. They were thinking about this layer in isolation. After conducting work interviews with several Business General Managers, it was clear that they were not developing because they were not asked to do a broad enough job. They were being measured on a very narrow set of results—revenue and volume. When we broadened the range of results to include people development, strategy development and execution, and process improvement, then the measurements and capabilities for their bosses—Group Managers—had to be changed as well to push work down to appropriate levels. Further, the Function Manager positions had to be expanded in order to improve preparation for Business General Manager roles and to accept the functional work that the Business General Managers were currently doing. So some work done by Function Managers had to be pushed down to Managers of Managers to balance the load. Pursuit of improvement at one layer soon turned into changes at every layer.

Because this company had a narrow focus at the outset, they weren't prepared for the cost and time required for the needed solution. Almost a full year was wasted as we worked our way down the organization one layer at a time. When establishing your purpose, it is critical to look at the whole system and not underestimate the amount of change needed at every layer.

Collecting Data

Considerable discipline is required when collecting data because it is the aggregate of all responses that counts, not just one layer's or one person's response. It is common to value a few people or a

particular function more than others, but you need the full picture to get the best answer. Interviewers must use a standardized set of questions and be disciplined enough to ask everyone the same questions in the same way.

The other requirement for interviewers is a deep understanding of what constitutes appropriate answers. A standard set of questions will elicit useful responses, but interviewers must interpret those responses and make judgments about how complete and appropriate they are. Follow-up probes are always needed to get the full answer.

Interview Questions

Deciding on the questions to be asked is directly connected to your purpose and to good practice. A core set of questions is required in all performance pipeline building efforts as well as discretionary questions associated with the purpose. Core questions usually

Lessons Learned

Leaders are not always fluent in the language of results

A significant number of leaders don't know what results are beyond the financials or their budget. When asked about required results, they list tasks. When asked about tasks required to achieve results, they list activities or say they have already answered. Softer items on the human side of business are viewed as skills needed for activities, not as results. For example, many executives view building an effective team as a skills-based activity rather than as a measurable result—they don't naturally talk about how teams are needed to achieve specific results, so interviewers need to draw this out of them. Profit is an outcome achieved through many underlying results, including a great plan and an effective team. Interviewers must frame their questions with results in mind.

address the job itself. Discretionary questions usually cover things like preparation needed, likely changes, unique relationships, and any specific problem or opportunity that interests you.

A set of questions that I commonly use is contained in Tool 2 at the end of this book. The first question, for instance, asks interviewees about the scope of their job. This question helps you understand how a person thinks about the breadth and depth of what he is supposed to contribute. It gives you great insight on how clear he is about his role, how broadly or narrowly he views accountability, and where he thinks he fits in the workings of the business or enterprise. The second question asks about expected results. The subject's answer reveals her mind-set and perspective on results in addition to the actual results as she sees them.

These questions are designed to give you two different sets of information. One is the factual response; the other is mind-set and perspective. You need both sets of information to plan the most useful path forward; changing required results without changing mind-set and perspective won't work. For example, a Function Manager in charge of Sales and Distribution might say, "The results I am expected to deliver are to

- Meet my revenue target
- Be at or below my cost budget
- Hold head count at last year's ending level
- Have 98 percent of all orders shipped on time."

While these factual responses are important, this respondent also demonstrates an execution mind-set. Outcomes associated with business building are not mentioned; this person doesn't address such issues as new customers, people development, teamwork between sales and distribution, or process improvements.

While this individual may pursue some of these business-building items, they won't be measured and accounted for.

Interviewing

Ideally, every leader should be interviewed. Practically, a representative sample at each layer is sufficient. Full participation at the upper layers—Business General Managers, Group Managers, and Enterprise Managers—is crucial for promoting better understanding and acceptance of the end product. For Function Managers, Managers of Managers, and Managers of Others (first-line managers), the representative sample approach is fine. Actual numbers depend on the size of your company or business, but five to ten people per layer are usually enough.

Choose the interviewees carefully. High performers generally give the best picture of what respondents are doing and why they are doing it; experts tend to provide the greatest insight on what needs to be done to produce great results. In some cases, people new to their jobs or new to the company can offer fresh insight, but most of the time they don't have enough context to be as helpful as you need them to be. Underperformers don't make good subjects.

Make a list of your best performers by layer, and include all the executives. Schedule ninety minutes for each interview; interviews can be completed in sixty minutes, but I have found that people really like to talk about their jobs. In fact, you will probably be the first person they have met in a long time who actually wants to hear about what they do and how they do it. By allowing the interview to “run long,” you gain rich answers—information that delves deep into what helps them deliver great results (and sometimes what prevents them from doing so).

At this point, the biggest challenge is making interviewees comfortable. They will want to know what will happen with their answers. Tell them that they are not being judged or assessed, that it's all about the nature of their work, and that answers will be

aggregated so that no attribution will be made. All that will be disclosed is their participation.

An opening preamble is also a good idea. A major retailer used this introduction:

Our goal is to improve overall performance by having the right people in the right job at the right time to take advantage of our growth opportunities.

We are trying to develop a more valid and accurate picture of the work that is done by leaders like you so we can better integrate development into our culture by building useful development, assessment, selection, and coaching tools.

We need your input and that of several other people at all layers. We are after as accurate a description of your work as possible.

You were chosen because it was felt you would do a good job of describing your work and some of the challenges you face. Your answers will be anonymous; all answers will be aggregated by organization layer.

A standardized interview is being used in order to drive consistency. I will read the questions to be sure that everyone is asking the same questions in the same way. Please feel free to ask for clarification or explanation if necessary.

Obviously, you should adapt this preamble to your own particular purpose and situation, though starting out with some version of the first paragraph is a good idea.

Sorting and Codifying the Data

In Aggregate

Ask yourself if the story hangs together. In other words, what conclusions can you draw after reviewing all the answers? Does the

Lessons Learned

The true character of a job is determined by the decisions the incumbent can make and by the obstacles to be overcome

Other factors may impact job character, but these two define the context where the real work sits. Responsibility for decision making defines what you “own.” One example: you can describe your job as “responsible for strategy,” but if you aren’t the one who decides what the final strategy is then you are the strategy analyst or recommender or researcher, not the true strategist. The true strategists make the decision and live with its consequences, so their decision making is much harder. Your recommendations are important, but you aren’t really determining the future direction of the company. A second example: when a company with a strong brand and well-developed distribution systems launches a new product, the obstacles differ from those facing a small, unknown company with limited distribution as it launches a new product. Those situations represent two totally different jobs. One job can rely on existing support that has a track record. The other has to overcome major obstacles without existing support. Support will have to be built or bought. Listen carefully to the answers to questions 3A, 3B, and 4 (see Tool 2). Look carefully at the connection between the results to be delivered and the decisions that can be made. Also listen carefully for the presence or absence of support and for established methods versus things that have to be built.

amount of time your leaders spend calling on customers suggest that leading and managing the team are taking a backseat? Does the decision-making authority seem reasonable for the expected results they described? Are the obstacles severe or just normal market conditions? The key is looking at the big picture based on all

the responses rather than focusing narrowly on a piece of information.

Analysis of the story in total is valuable for making decisions about what standards to choose and how challenging they need to be at each layer.

Looking at the actual work being done and people's understanding of their job, hearing what is "top-of-mind" and what has to be probed for, provides a useful picture of how your leaders really work. In some instances, your aggregated interview data may be sufficiently surprising and compelling that it causes you to reassess your purpose for building a performance pipeline.

Example—Finding Surprises

A major consumer goods company with a large global presence launched an important culture change effort. After completing some very large acquisitions, it wanted to create a new culture that included a uniform work style and a common value system. Strategically, the emphasis was on an aggressive growth objective via finding new products and markets as well as improving the supply chain. The leadership development group needed to create new programs in order to support the culture change. A sampling of fifty leaders from around the world was asked to participate in the work interviews. Seven to ten leaders per layer were interviewed by a small HR team. Two unexpected findings:

- *Not one person mentioned the culture change effort as part of his work (results, tasks, decisions, obstacles, time allocation).*
- *Not one person mentioned innovation of any kind.*

As a result of these unexpected responses, the company decided to use the performance pipeline to communicate the

required culture change as results to be delivered and to set the standard for those results for every leader around the world. Their original purpose was development, but based on what they discovered in the interviews, their primary purpose became performance.

I would encourage you, after analyzing the interview data, to reconsider what additional purpose, beyond the purpose(s) defined at the outset, is key to your organization's success. Aggregating all responses to the "obstacle" and the "need more authority" questions will give you a sense of where trouble spots exist, how pervasive they are, and where changes in current management practices are needed.

By Layer

With six to ten completed interviews for each layer in hand you can begin to build your performance pipeline. Start with Managers of Others (first-line managers) and follow these steps. A quick read of the example of an actual performance pipeline at the end of this book (Tool 1) will help you see where this is going.

Lessons Learned

All the data will give you an insider's view of what's really going on in the organization

I've found that people in Human Resources are astonished by the insights these interviews provide about who does what in the company. Analyzing the data gives clarity about challenges. Therefore, use the interview to learn the business. If you do enough of them, you will be the most knowledgeable person in your company about its inner workings.

Step 1

Read through one entire interview to get a feel for the person and how she sees her job in this layer.

Step 2

Pick out all the nouns, because they are results. Nouns such as *strategy, sales, teams, suppliers, expenses, and people* all provide “clues” as to what is important and needs to be spotlighted and measured in this position. It should be easy to do with questions 1, 2, 3A, 3B, and 4 (Tool 2). For questions like 5 and 6 you will have to interpret answers to understand what the “noun” is. *Team-building skills* means *team*; *time spent planning* means *plans*. Repeat this for each interview.

Step 3

Choose the work categories that suit your business or company. Every business needs operating or financial results, management results, leadership results, and relationship results. You may use other language or additional ideas for your categories. You can also create a category for addressing a special need.

Example—A Large Financial Services Company

- *Financial Results*
- *Customer Effectiveness Results (adding, serving, and keeping customers)*
- *Management Results*
- *Leadership Results*
- *Relationship Results*
- *Global Effectiveness Results (support for other geographies and businesses)*

Example—A Diversified Construction and Marine Products Company

- *Delivering Results*
- *Health, Safety, and Environment*
- *People and Teams*
- *Hands-on Management*
- *Customer Driven*
- *Open and Direct Dialogue*

Examples of Special Needs Categories Currently in Use

- *Growth Results*
- *Brand Delivery Results*
- *Innovation Results*
- *Safety Results*
- *Social Responsibility Results*
- *User/Patient Results (health care company)*

Step 4

Create column one (“Results”) of the performance pipeline for this layer (see Tool 1). Fit all the nouns into the work categories you have chosen. Make a judgment about the adequacy of the list. Does this look right and sound right? Should some of these work elements be at a lower level? a higher level?

Step 5

Decide what work elements are missing from the list, and make any additions. Are there any important company initiatives that should

be represented in some way? Are basic requirements like developing a successor, or executing the strategy, or improving business process adequately represented?

Refer to lists developed by other companies as displayed in the following chapters. In addition, note that the performance pipeline isn't meant to replace the planning process; it supplements it. Add the KPIs or goals as an attachment to the standards for each leader.

Step 6

Set the standards (column two, "Full Performance"). Now two critical decisions have to be made. First, where do you want to set the bar for performance? Is meeting budgeted objectives full performance or exceptional performance? How many new customers do you want to add? How many successors should each leader have? In many ways this is the hardest part to get right. Usually it is easier to lower a standard later than to raise it later.

Lessons Learned

The Performance Pipeline provides essential adaptability

One big reason that strategies fail is that new work required by the strategy isn't assigned to anyone or is assigned to only a few people. The Performance Pipeline enables regular reassessment of all standards and allows you to change them quickly as strategy changes. Changing the standards enables a conversation between a leader and her team about strategic direction, new priorities, a different way of working, and role clarity. Every leader can stay aware in a simple and straightforward way of new outcomes expected. Those role profiles or job descriptions you have been using just aren't adaptable without a lot of effort.

Second, determine the number of standards you will employ. Not all work elements need to have a standard. Not all work elements are critical every year. Choose the twenty to twenty-five most important work elements based on this year's operating plan and what you need to execute your strategy this year. Write standards for them. My rule of thumb for any company's first performance pipeline is fewer but high standards. Others can be added later.

Step 7

Define exceptional performance (column three). If exceptional performance isn't defined, full performance will soon be viewed as exceptional. For the Performance Pipeline, exceptional performance has three elements. First, results were substantially higher than plan or budget; a few percentage points higher isn't exceptional. You can trust your intuition on this. Second, exceptional performance is often the best amongst peers. It is or becomes the role model that others try to emulate. Third, exceptional performance can be something relevant but entirely new, or something no one has thought of in your company. Recognize, though, that not every full performance standard needs an exceptional counterpart. In fact some standards, like safety, don't fit any of the three exceptional elements. A year with no lost-time injuries or accidents is what's expected no matter what goal you set.

Step 8

Define the transition in work values. Work values (see Lessons Learned box on the following page) continue to be the sticking point in the upward movement of leaders and the main reason for performance that is not meeting requirements established for a given level. Leaders have to learn to value the work required at their new layer or existing layer.

Natural progressions exist that define the transition in work values. There are also some things that are unique and have to

Lessons Learned

When leaders move up but don't adopt the work values of their assigned layer, the business won't grow properly and the leaders don't develop

At lower passages, leaders must value, pursue, and deliver today's results. Included are such things as product delivery, customer satisfaction, and cost management. At upper passages, leaders must value, pursue, and deliver a definition of the future, investment for long-term payoff, development of future leaders, and cultivation of possible new partners. When leaders move up but continue to value, pursue, and deliver today's results, the business can't grow properly. Critical requirements for future success are not being delivered. Shifting work values is the underlying driver; not shifting work values becomes the underlying problem.

be thought through. What follows are two examples of natural progression of work values, first in achieving results, and second in the changes of time frame and content in planning:

Layer	Achieving Results—Using Organization, Not Just People
Self-Manager	Through own effort and collaborating with peers
Manager of Others	Through the work of others
Manager of Managers	Through managers (not through self-managers)
Function Manager	Through an entire function
Business Manager	Through integration of all functions
Group Manager	Through business managers
Enterprise Manager	Through integrated systems and processes

Layer	Planning—Important Changes in Time Frame and Content
Self-Manager	Project completion and weekly production
Manager of Others	Annual cycle for goals and budgets
Manager of Managers	Two-year operating plan
Function Manager	Three-to-five-year functional strategy
Business Manager	Five-year business strategy
Group Manager	Ten-year portfolio strategic framework
Enterprise Manager	Ten or more years enterprise strategic framework

The nature of your business drives many changes in work values required by layer. For example, some experts (Self-Managers) in financial services do business with the CEO and Chief Financial Officer in customer companies. They have to learn relationship-building for its own sake with very senior executives at companies that are not now but might become customers—they may need to transition from valuing relationships with current customers to valuing relationships with people in general (to create networks, alliances, friendships, partnerships, and so on). Thinking through the point of contact and the nature of the relationship is the starting point. Thinking through the broadening of contacts is also important. In this way, people can reflect on what types of relationship they value (and what types of relationship they ignore but need to value). Leaders, for instance, need to consider community relationships; at what layer do a majority of leaders get involved in the community?

Step 9

Decide what else to include in your performance pipeline. Required changes in work values should be at the top of the page (see Tool 1). If the first column contains the work elements, the second column lists the full performance standards, and the third lists the

exceptional performance standards, what do you need in the fourth column? Most companies choose to identify the skills, experience, and knowledge required to do the job (see Tool 1, column four). These are extremely useful for planning development, coaching, and diagnosing problems. It is well worth the time required to produce this list. Clear direction is thus provided to everyone who wants to improve his performance.

Several companies have chosen to fit their competency models here. That's a great idea because the competencies originally were created to help produce results, although the connection between competencies and results has been lost in most cases. Inserting competency models into the fourth column can help restore that connection.

Column four can be used too to spell out what you *don't* want:

Example

A major software firm felt that their managers needed additional guidance from the organization. They decided to use the fourth column to identify the signs that conveyed inappropriate performance or poor transition to the layer. For a Manager of Others, column four included: "spends all his time in his office with the door closed" and "solves all the hard problems himself." That idea may be useful to you if your company is new and growing very fast, or if you have not yet built a management culture in your company, or if you are trying to change management practices.

Validating the Standards

Before your newly minted performance pipeline is put into practice, interviewees and senior management should review it. Conducting validation sessions with groups of people rather than individually seems to work best. The give-and-take in the room

helps everyone get calibrated on performance and enables a common definition of key words.

Allowing Some Flexibility

How your performance pipeline gets used is a matter of choice based on your current needs and your feelings about what your people can absorb. Some companies have suggested that measuring their leaders on twenty-five standards instead of their five or six KPIs or goals was too much to ask. So, they used their performance pipeline for leadership development only, at least in the first year of its use. Their rationale was that the concept needed to be socialized before it was implemented.

Several companies have used their performance pipeline initially to improve succession planning. In-depth definitions of each

Lessons Learned

Validation meetings provide increased specificity to roles

Without validation meetings, dialogue about roles—both of participants in the meetings and of direct reports and supervisors—rarely happens. Most leaders have some level of concern about their own role and about what they should be asking of their direct reports. Despite instructions that request some standards be eliminated so that the document can be tight and focused, every single validation group in my experience has added standards! They want more specificity, not less.

Good facilitation is required to keep validation meetings on track. Don't try to solve all the company's problems in this setting. A scribe is also needed to record the changes and additions. True ownership can be achieved in a robust meeting, so every effort should be made to utilize participants' suggested changes. Obviously, some editing by a knowledgeable person will be required.

layer improved consistency and precision for both performance and potential ratings. Development plans for improving performance and enhancing potential were grounded in more substantial targets. Succession planning can't be effective if you lack a performance pipeline that is specific to the company. In fact, one CEO told me, "I don't know how we ever did succession planning without this definition."

Of course, some companies have used the Pipeline model for performance measurement right away and found it to be extraordinarily useful. We'll look at how the performance management process is changed by the Performance Pipeline, and how to get maximum value from it, in Chapter Eleven.

Company E's performance is a good example of the most commonly used version of a performance pipeline. It is displayed as Tool 1—an actual performance pipeline—at the end of this book. Look carefully at the transition in work values listed at the top of the first page for each layer. The content in all four columns is classic.

Lessons Learned

Operating management will grab the Performance Pipeline and run with it even if Human Resources isn't ready to put it into practice

Leaders in operational roles tend to grasp the Pipeline's value immediately and want to use it right now for performance management, succession planning, organization, and coaching. At the software company that built its column four around examples of inappropriate or incomplete performance, the software engineering leaders grabbed the performance standards and started using them immediately despite implementation concerns and well in advance of HR's planned rollout.

Since the CEO is a single position with unique requirements, I don't usually write performance standards for that position, and the companies haven't requested them. A unique definition for this unique role seems to make more sense. For this reason, there is no Enterprise Manager layer in Tool 1. Results, though, should be defined for CEOs even if standards aren't created.

The next seven chapters will cover the results that should be delivered at each layer, starting with the Enterprise CEO and working down the Performance Pipeline. Each chapter provides specific definitions of results to be delivered at that layer and the enablers to be passed down to the layer below in order to make it successful. I recommend that you read each chapter before attempting to build your own performance standards for that layer.

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