BetterEvaluation

Sharing Information to Improve Evaluation

Understand Causes of Outcomes and Impacts

- *Jane Davidson*


Outcomes
Impacts

As a profession, we often either

oversimplify causation

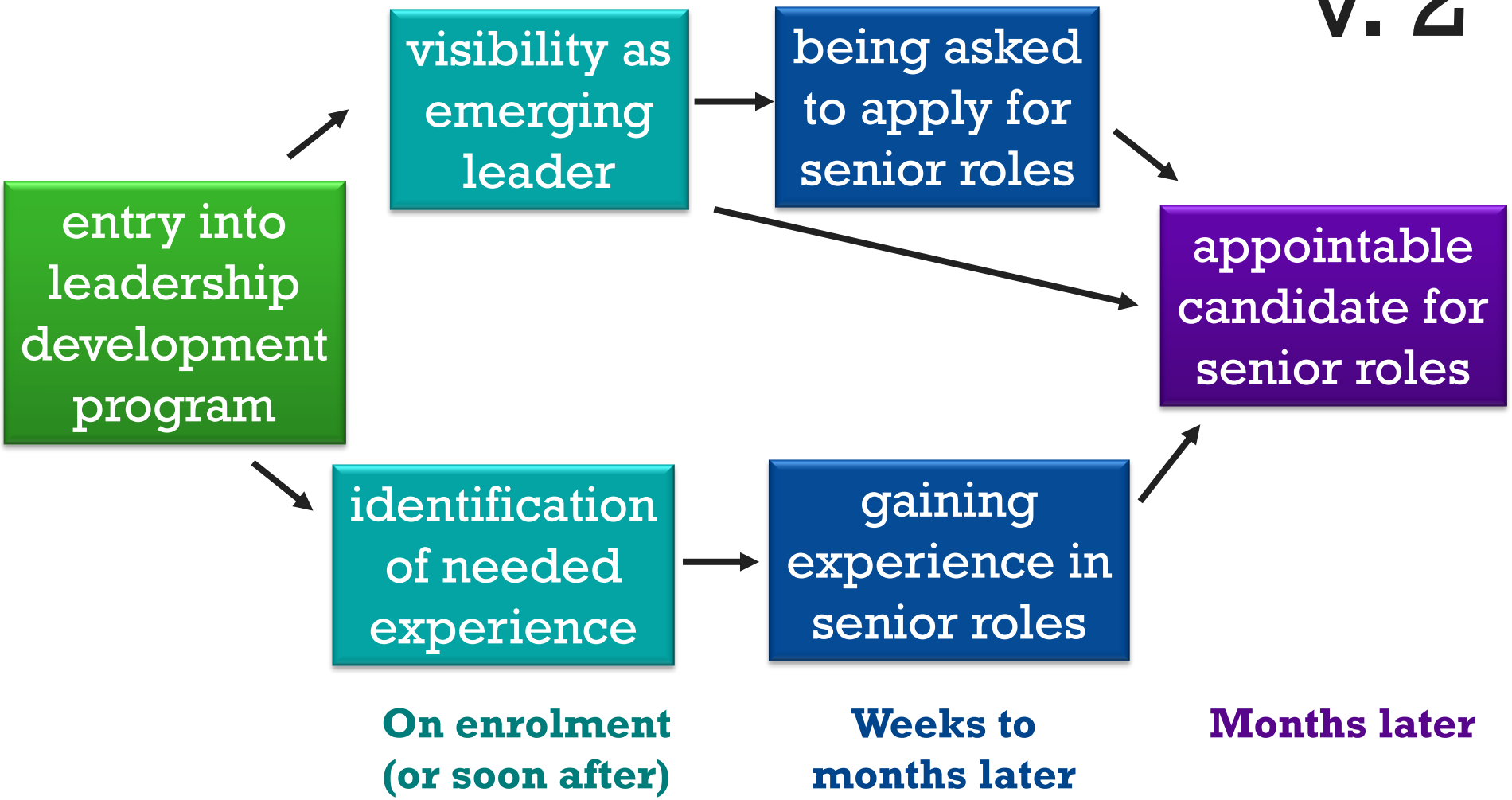
or we **overcomplicate** it!


senior
leadership &
management
development
program

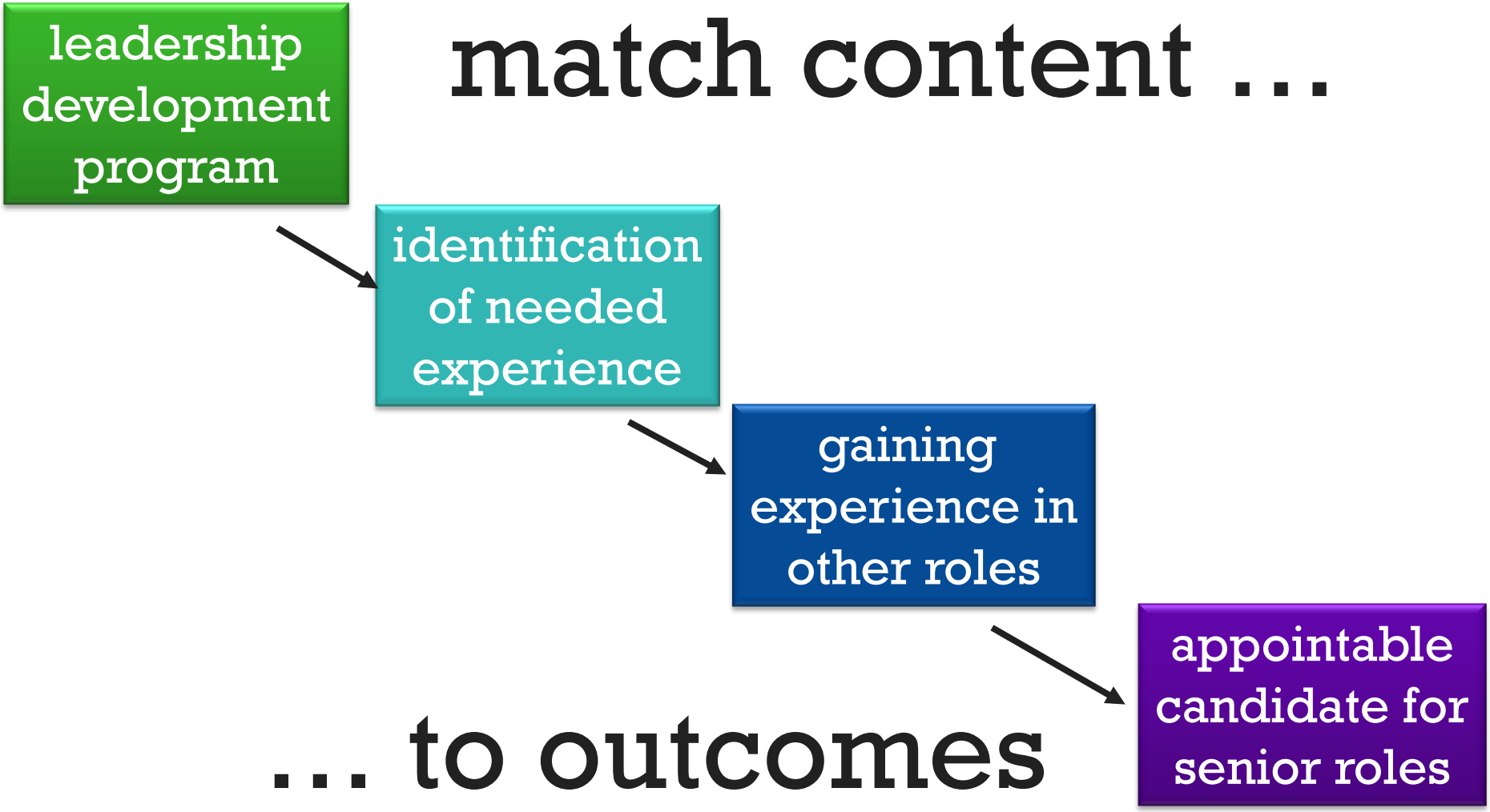
too soon?

check timing of outcomes v. 1

check timing of outcomes v. 2



match content …



… to outcomes

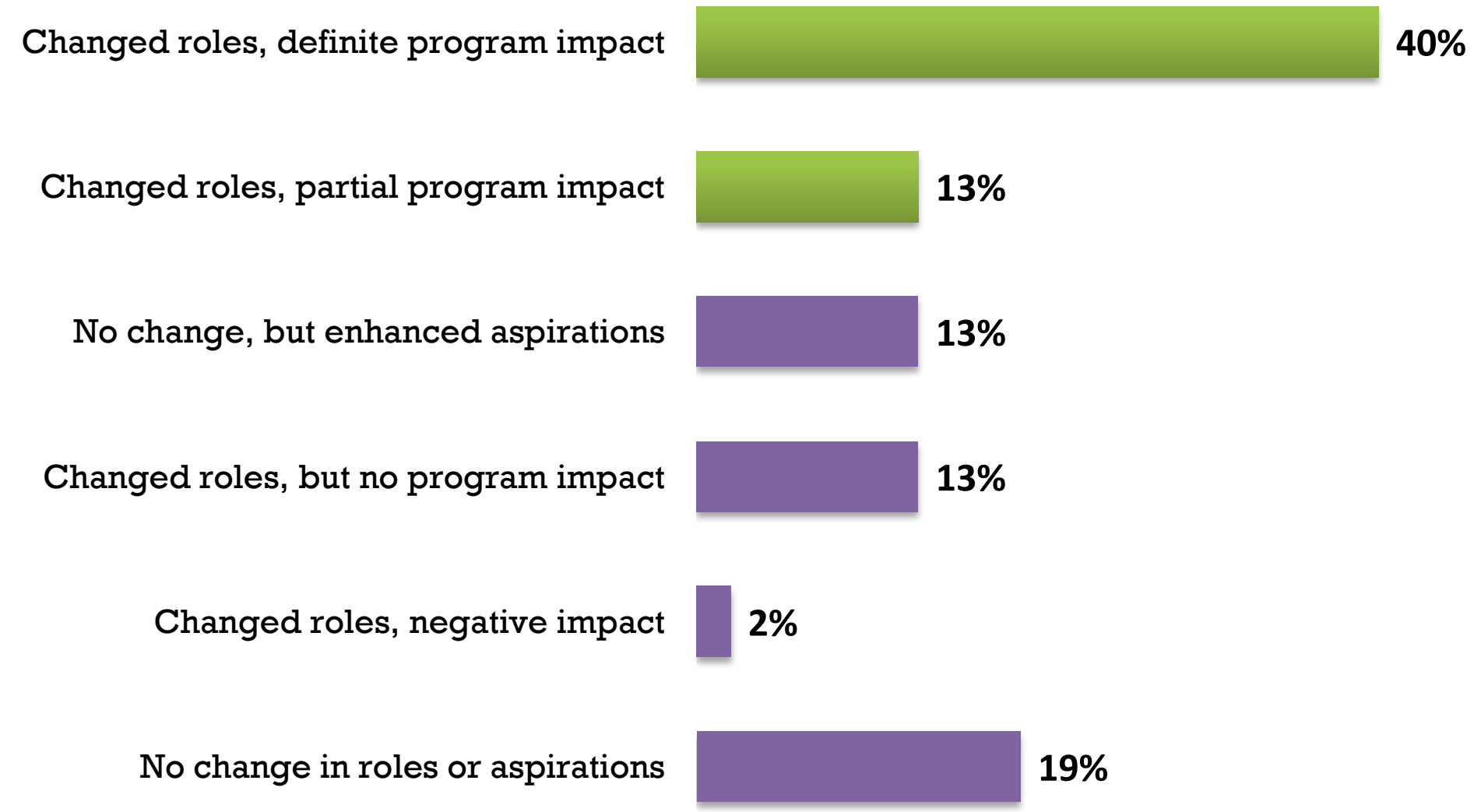
ask participants

changed job?

career advancement?

did the program help?

More than half said the program helped them get a promotion



"firstly, actually
being accepted
for the course
is rated highly,

secondly I understand
that ***my interview***
went well *because*
of my ability to relate
program learnings to
real life issues."

3 messages

3 messages

1. all outcome/impact evaluation needs causal inference

3 messages

1. all outcome/impact evaluation needs causal inference
2. going qualitative doesn't let you off the causal hook!

3 messages

1. all outcome/impact evaluation needs causal inference
2. going qualitative doesn't let you off the causal hook!
3. the real "gold standard" is sound causal reasoning!

Understand Causes

Contribute Content

Most evaluations need to investigate what is causing the outcomes and impacts of an intervention. (Some process evaluations assume that certain activities are contributing to intended outcomes without investigating these).

*Download a summary of the tasks, options, and approaches associated with **understanding causes of outcomes and impacts**.*

Sometimes it is useful to think about this in terms of 'causal attribution' – did the intervention cause the outcomes and impacts that have been observed? In many cases, however, the outcomes and impacts have been caused by a combination of programs, or by a program in combination with other factors.

In such cases it can be more useful to think about "causal contribution" – did the intervention contribute to the outcomes and impacts that have been observed?

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Manage Evaluation
Define
Frame
Describe
Understand Causes
- Check the results support causal attribution
- Compare results to the counterfactual
- Investigate possible alternative explanations

Synthesize
Report And Support Use

Ask a Question

Ask the Forum

Tasks

1. Check the results support causal attribution

One strategy for causal inference is to check that the data are consistent with what we would expect if the intervention were being effective? This involves not only whether or not results occurred, but their timing and specificity.

2. Compare the results to the counterfactual

Another strategy is to assess the impact of an intervention is to compare it to an estimate of what would have happened without the intervention. Options include the use of control groups, comparison groups and expert predictions.

3. Investigate possible alternative explanations

A third strategy is to identify other factors that might have caused the impacts and see if it is possible to rule them out.

Check the results support causal attribution

One of the tasks involved in understanding causes is to check whether the observed results are consistent with a cause-effect relationship between the intervention and the observed impacts.

Some of the options for this task involve an analysis of existing data and some involve additional data collection. It is often appropriate to use several options in a single evaluation. Most impact evaluations should include some options that address this task.

Options

Gathering additional data

- ***Asking Key Informants to Attribute Causality:*** providing evidence that links participation plausibly with observed changes.
- ***Modus operandi:*** drawing on the previous experience of participants and stakeholders to determine what constellation or pattern of effects is typical for an initiative.
- ***Process tracing:*** focusing on the use of clues (causal-process observations, CPOs) to adjudicate between alternative possible explanations.

Analysis

- ***Check dose-response patterns:*** examining the link between dose and response as part of determining whether the program caused the outcome.
- ***Check intermediate outcomes:*** checking whether all cases that achieved the final impacts achieved the intermediate outcomes.
- ***Check results match a statistical model:*** comparing results with a statistical model to determine if the program caused the outcome.
- ***Check results match expert predictions:*** making predictions based on program theory or an emerging theory of wider contributors to outcomes and then following up these predictions over time.
- ***Check timing of outcomes:*** checking predicated timing of events with the dates of actual changes and outcomes.
- ***Comparative case studies:*** using a comparative case study to check variation in program implementation.
- ***Qualitative comparative analysis:*** comparing the configurations of different cases to identify the components that produce specific outcomes.
- ***Realist analysis of testable hypotheses:*** Using a realist program theory (what works for whom in what circumstances through what causal mechanisms?) to identify specific contexts where results would and would not be expected and checking these.

Approaches

Some approaches combine these different elements of explanation:

- ***Contribution Analysis:*** assessing whether the program is based on a plausible theory of change, whether it was implemented as intended, whether the anticipated chain of results occurred and the extent to which other factors influenced the program's achievements.
- ***Collaborative Outcomes Reporting:*** mapping existing data against the theory of change, and then using a combination of expert review and community consultation to check for the credibility of the evidence.
- ***Multiple Lines and Levels of Evidence (MLLE):*** reviewing a wide range of evidence from different sources to identify consistency with the theory of change and to explain any exceptions.

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Resources


Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations


Purposeful program theory: effective use of theories of change and logic models


Designing and Conducting Health Systems Research Projects: Guide


Development Impact Evaluation Initiative


Models of Causality and Causal Inference

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Suggest a Resource

Ask a Question

Ask the Forum

1

Check the results support causal attribution

we used

modus operandi

timing of outcomes

intermediate outcomes

match content to outcomes

ask key informants

1

Check the results support causal attribution

we used

modus operandi

timing of outcomes

intermediate outcomes

match content to outcomes

ask key informants

process tracing

comparative case studies

dose-response patterns

fit with a statistical model

fit with expert predictions

statistical control of extraneous variables

realist analysis

qualitative comparative analysis

2

Compare the results to the counterfactual

we used

ask key informants

expert-estimated counterfactual

2

Compare the results to the counterfactual

we used

ask key informants

expert-estimated counterfactual

statistically created counterfactual

logically constructed counterfactual

regression discontinuity

sequential allocation

control group

matched comparisons

judgemental matching

instrumental variables

difference in difference (or double difference)

qualitative comparative analysis

3

Investigate possible alternative explanations

we used

general elimination methodology & modus operandi

searching for disconfirming evidence

asking key informants

3

Investigate possible alternative explanations

we used

general elimination methodology & modus operandi

searching for disconfirming evidence

asking key informants

force field analysis

process tracing

RAPID outcomes assessment

ruling out technical explanations

statistically controlling for extraneous variables

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Tasks

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- Synthesize go

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Further resources

http://betterevaluation.org/plan/understandcauses

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