Sustainability in the Nonprofit Sector: Communication Strategies to Increase the Bottom Line

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This paper explores the impact of communications management strategies in the sustainability of community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs). Several communication challenges prevalent among nonprofits in Southwestern PA are identified and communication strategies for improving the bottom line are provided as a viable solution. This paper will be of interest to consultants, academics and nonprofit leaders who seek to undertsand and address financial sustainability through effective communication management strategies.

Building nonprofit organizational capacity for sustainability is an important objective for community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs). Hansberry (2002) convened a panel of nonprofit experts who defined nonprofit capacity-building as, "A non-profit human service organization's capacity is its long-term ability to achieve its mission effectively and efficiently through management, governance and persistent re-dedication to achieving results" (2002:14). While the first priority is service provision and mission fullfillment, outstanding performance as reflected by building a capacity to service the client is typically associated with sustainability. Sustainability as it is used in this paper refers to the ability of an organization to build financial reserves; to develop and sustain viable funding support both long-term and short-term; and to engage in marketing, advertising and branding strategies to assist with these efforts through strategic communications management.

Many CBOs and FBOs occupy a special niche as service providers, addressing a host of social and economic problems that plague communities, families, and individuals in their serving areas. As providers of many of the services that hold neighborhoods together, they are among the local champions that mobilize and change the landscape of their respective communities through effective social service programming. CBOs/FBOs contribute to the overall economic performance and serve as a shock absorber during economic slowdowns by providing jobs to sustain a portion of the population and providing services to those in need (Kearns et al., 2003; Light, 2005; Paytas and Lagana, 2006). Accordingly, it is imperative that the CBOs/FBOs remain viable as service providers and employers.

The Southwestern PA Nonprofit Community

The researcher served as an independent organizational development (OD) consultant in Southwestern PA for over 15 years. During that time OD services were rendered to over 100 CBOs/FBOs in an effort to increase revenue and to assist with capacity-building efforts for long-term sustainability. This paper draws upon those experiences and relies upon secondary data from the Forbes Fund to substantiate the challenges and opportunites in the nonprofit sector. While Southwestern PA nonprofits are highlighted, I suspect similar patterns can be seen nationally. The paper seeks to increase awareness to assist with sustainability efforts among nonprofits.

Southwestern PA contained roughly 2,700 nonprofits with more than 1,800 in Allegheny County alone. A survey conducted by the Forbes Fund ascertained that on average, nonprofits received 35 percent of their budgets from a combination of individual, foundation, and corporate donors; roughly 16 percent from individuals, 14 percent from foundations and 5 percent from corporations. The remaining portions came from fees for service, government contracts, endowments, the United Way and religious sources (Hansberry, 2002; Kearns et al., 2003; Light, 2005).

Despite ongoing efforts for sustainability, a significant portion of Allegheny County CBOs and FBOs struggled to remain economically viable in an increasingly competitive funding environment. Many were dependent on single sources of revenue, primarily the local government. However, funding became more difficult to secure due to a decreased availability of support from federal, state, and local governments.

A signficant number of nonprofits operated at or near break-even, making them vulnerable to inconsistent funding sources. Studies about the Pittsburgh area's nonprofit sector indicated that CBO/FBO's operating margins tended to be the thinnest in organizations facing the first surges in demand for services from economic downturns. During those times only 61 percent of the organizations maintained positive operating margins. Although the communnity remained generous in giving and volunteering, many nonprofits appeared to operate perilously close to the edge (Kearns et al., 2003; Light, 2005; Paytas and Lagana, 2006).

In addition, the average reported deficit for nonprofits in the Pittsburgh area was approximately $256,000 (Paytas and Lagana, 2006). If continued over the next decade, funding issues may result in an erosion of civic engagement in the midst of a rising demand for social services and an increased need for employment opportunities (Kearns et al., 2003; Light, 2005; Paytas and Lagana, 2006).

As an OD consultant, several executives and boards shared a belief that capacity-building for sustainability was a distraction from time and energy needed to operate existing programs. They appeared to minimize the notion that capacity-building was critical to building and sustaining long-term productivity and viability of essential programs and services. A significant number resorted to crisis management as an everyday survival strategy to meet increasing demands for limited resources (Hansberry, 2002; Kearns et al., 2003; Light, 2005).

A Forbes Fund study explored the funding capability of CBOs/FBOs to determine their organizational and management capacity and the ability of FBOs to meet emerging needs. The study revealed that both CBOs and FBOs reported similar priorities with regard to needing assistance in fundraising; however, FBOs were most interested in improving financial management (Hansberry, 2002; Kearns et al., 2003; Light, 2005).

Less than half (and in some cases less than one third) of the FBO organizations report having a high capacity to engage in any of the selected sustainability activities. While 58% of the CBOs and FBOs say they have strategic plans, only 38.6% said their organization used objective data and analysis to make important decisions; 33% expressed an ability to secure financial resources to ensure uninterrupted services, and only 26% said the same about generating unrestricted revenue (Kearns ey al., 2003; Light, 2005). Table 1 summarizes the sustainability efforts of FBOs & CBOs.

Table 1: Sustainability Efforts of FBOs & CBOs

	Community-based Organizations (CBO's) Capacity for Sustainabiity Efforts		Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) Capacity for Sustainabilty Efforts	
	High	Low	High	Low
Use objective data and analysis to make important decisions	50.8	15.9	38.6	13.3
Secure finanacial resources to ensure uninterrupted programs and services	29.8	21.6	33.1	29.7
Use information technology to improve performance	44.2	19.0	45.9	18.3
Generate unrestricted revenue to spend where most needed	15.8	44.9	26.4	44.9
Manage legal and liability issues	45.1	27.9	16.3	48.6
Respond quickly to unexpected needs for services in the community	37.9	22.9	32.9	23.1
Develop and implement new programs to meet community needs	36.0	19.1	47.1	15.5

(Source: Kearns et al., 2003)

Pittsburgh is one of the most philantropic communities in the country with notable funders such as Mellon, Heinz, Pittsburgh, Scaife and others who generously provide millions of revenue dollars to worthy nonprofits annually. However, funding is becoming increasingly competitive, with more stringent guidelines and higher expectations for service delivery and outcomes. As a result, nonprofits must engage in sound business practices such as sustainability and capacity-building through strategic communications management in a manner that parallels for-profit enterprises.

Strategic Communications Management for Sustainability

Sustainable CBO/FBOs have a clearly defined mission that is relevant to community needs and is embraced at all organizational levels. They also have capable, motivated leadership and staff members, with well-defined accountability. Such organization are results-oriented and offer services consistent with the mission and vision. Also of importance is the ability to access information and resources to create reliable and diverse revenue streams. Sustainable CBO/FBOs must have the ability to improve programs and respond to change.

In order for CBOs and FBOs to have the ability to adapt as new opportunities appear, and to sustain efforts over time, they must develop effective communication strategies. According to Andrews and Baird (2005), "communications is not merely an activity in an organization, it is the lifeblood that allows organizations to exist (2005:46)." Without communications, relationships cannot be maintained, organizational goals and objectives cannot be achieved, and activities cannot be coordinated nor decisions made. In short, sustainability cannot occur without strategic organizational communication. In looking at organizational communications, Barrett (2006) argues that the effectiveness of an organization with respect to the achievement of its' goals is closely related to its' effectiveness in handling information (2006: 368). Organizational communication is the process by which messages are sent and includes: the monitoring of the types of messages sent, the selection of the appropriate channels, the values associated with those messages, the amount of information conveyed, the rules and norms under which messgaes are sent, and the organizational variables affecting the process like structure and outcomes measures (Andrews and Baird, 2005; DeWine, 1994).

Capacity-building activities for sustainability cannot be successful without structured organizational communication. Organizational communications provides a framework for building the internal and external communications capacity within CBOs and FBOs to improve financial viability. There are several steps that can assist in developing a communications management strategy, which will be discussed in some detail as follows. The first step is to clearly define the problem before a suitable intervention can be developed (Barrett, 2006; Gillis, 2006; Smith and Mounter, 2005).

Step One: Problem Identification

Identification of the depth and breadth of the problem with which one is dealing must come first. To the extent that there is a gap between where they are and where they want to go, a problem exists. The challenge is to create plans to close the gaps. Thus, the first step is to describe the organization in its current state and then determine its' immediate and long-term goals (French and Bell, 1990). Some critical questions to consider are:

1. Is there a well-defined, widely communicated statement of the organizational mission or purpose?
2. Do employess have job descriptions, job-related goals and objectives, and performance feedback?
3. Is there an organizational structure that provides for an adequate span of control and balanced allocation of resources?
4. Is there a process for commmunicating management information needed to achieve work objectives?
5. Are program efforts consistent with the vision and mission; do program efforts meet funder expectations?

For example, the Harbor House is a CBO/FBO located in the poverty-stricken area of Pittsburgh. The community is considered high-risk because of a high unemployment rate, drugs, violence, and a high school drop out rate. While the organization had a mission to essentially, "save the community," it lacked the capacity for such efforts. Instead of identifying a niche area in which to make an impact, the mission was too broad in scope to be effective. The staff, recruited from the adjacent church, lacked the requisite credentials to address the socio-psychological challenges they faced each day. The span of control was non-existent with a CEO that micro-managed the Program Directors, oftentimes overstepping boundaries during performance reviews. Resources were shifted in a "rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul" manner, leaving

accountants unable to complete a succesful audit for annual reporting. Expenditures were justified with the "quality vs. quantity" argument to the dismay of funders.

The CBO/FBO must be willing to take a candid look at their organizations to determine its current state of existence. While it would be all too easy to look at the successes, it is critical to explore strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats through dialogue and discussion with key stakeholders such as the CEO and board members. This step is important to sustainability as it will provide a lens for exploring gaps in service delivery, structure, management, communications and operations which ultimaely impact the capacity of the organization to be sustainable over time.

Step Two: Needs Assessments

After these questions are addressed, the next step is to conduct a formal needs assessment. Sometimes referred to as an organizational audit, a needs assessment is an effective strategy for identifying gaps in structure, service, operations, staff development and training needs, and to identify priority areas for long and short-term funding. There are several assessment techniques to gain insights from key stakeholders; however, sampling offers the most cost effective and time efficient manner to collect data in an organization.

Sampling. When working with a large organization (100+), it is unreasonable to expect everyone to be interviewed or included in the needs assessment. Therefore a method for sampling the population is needed to ensure individuals are representative of the group. Two methods of selecting subjects are with random and stratified sampling. Random sampling means that every person in the organization has an equal chance of being selected. Stratified sampling is conducted by selecting individuals from subgroups represented in the sample, dividing the population into subgroups and doing a random sampling in each group (Babbie, 1990; DeWine, 1994; Hamilton, 1987). One effective strategy is to triangulate data by conducting focus groups and surveys via among both stratified and random groups.

A good starting point for CBO/FBOs is to consider assessing internal and external organizational communications by asking questions in the following areas:

1. Strategic objectives - To what extent is communications planning aligned with the CBO/FBO's strategic goals?
2. Processes - To what extent is communications integrated into the yearly business planning process?
3. Management - To what extent does management accept responsibility for organizational communications?
4. Messages - To what extent are messages targeted, consistent, and strategic?
5. Media/Forums - To what extent are multiple channels used to communicate, and are they appropriate for the message and culture?
6. Communication Staff - To what extent are there communications staff, and are they strategically placed within the organization?
7. Communication Assessment - To what extent is communications measured and included in performance outcomes and goals setting? (Barrett, 2006; Hamilton, 1987; Smith and Mounter, 2005).

A significant number of CBO/FBOs in Southwestern PA failed to recognize the relevance of, and connection between, communications and sustainability as revealed during the assessment process. For instance, OD consulting services were provided to develop critical documents such as strategic plans, mission and vision statements, as well as targeted messages and strategies for fundraising. Unfortunately, many capacity-building efforts proved unproductive, due partially to limited communication strategies, and a lack of commitment to change, thereby appearing contrived for the sole purpose of generating revenue.

Data Collection Method. Surveys and interviews are the most frequently used methods for collecting data about an organization. Surveys are developed by identifying broad categories of concerns to be examined and then constructing questions within each of the categories (Babbie 1990; DeWine, 1994).

These areas can be identified from past research and   discussions with key stakeholders within the organization.

There are several types of forced-choice questionnaires incuding the Likert Scale for responses from which respondents can indicate their opinions and beliefs. Surveys are the easiest and least expensive way to collect large amounts of data that can be quantified (Babbie, 1990; DeWine, 1994; Hamilton, 1987). Interviews provide a rich source of data and can be most helpful for uncovering areas of concern. An interview guide can be constructed similar to the manner in which the content matrix is used for designing open-ended questions. The population is an important factor to consider when selecting the data collection method. For instance, when collecting data from children, teen or individuals with poor reading skills, interviews both individually, and collectively proved much more helpful in gaining rich qualitative data from the client perspective. Surveys were at times viewed as intimidating or unimportant.

Organizational outcomes data can also be a source of information. Organizational outcomes data includes all the publications produced by the organization as well as personnel files and client records. It can even include routine data. CBO/FBO's in Southwestern PA were mandated to report program outcomes as a funding requirement. However, many were incapable of establishing parameters for data collection and typically scrambled to report outcomes at the end of the funding cycle. Structuring outcomes and data collection methods at the onset of funding and communicating the importance of timely data collection across the entire organzation is critical to accurate reporting, and subsequently for repeat funding.

During the process of data collection, care must be used to maintain objectivity and openness to a variety of opinions and viewpoints. A wide variety of data should be used to arrive at the clearest picture of where the organization is, and where it wants to be in terms of how well it communicates and how communication efforts impact sustainability (Babbie, 1990; DeWine, 1994).

Step Three: Data Analysis

Once data is collected, a careful analysis should take place so that hasty conclusions and premature solutions are not drawn. Objectivity is critical to developing viable solutions. There should be a clear communications pattern that surfaces throughout the analysis or triangulation of many pieces of data and evidence. Without careful data analysis, interventions may fail and leave the organzation worse off than before.

Assessing quantitative data can reveal patterns, trends and perspectives. This research is typically descriptive in nature which includes correlational and causal-comparative studies. Descriptive research is used to estimate the nature and degree of existing conditions. For instance, descriptive statistics can reveal the drop out rate of teens, the number of single parent families, the number of unemployed adults and other "risk factors" in a program area that predispose families to require supportive services. To address relationships between these variables directly, correlational and causal-comparative studies may be used. For example, a correlation study of relationships between single parent families and high school drop out, between drug addiction and drop out have been carried out. This data is critical to establishing a need for funding to provide "remediation" services to mitigate against the risk of drop out (Eichelberger, 1989).

Step Four: Intervention

Once the needs assessment has been completed, the next step is to plan an intervention. This must come from the data analysis itself rather than be preplanned or superimposed (Babbie, 1990; DeWine, 1994; Eichelberger,1989). There are several intervention strategies that can be used:

Organizational Development and Organizational Communications. Organizational development (OD) is a form of intervention that combines the aforementioned strategies to assist in reaching the full organizational potential. French and Bell (1990) define organizational development as, "sets of structured activities in which selected organizational units engage in a task or a sequence of tasks where the task goals are related directly or indirectly to organizational improvement" (1990:113).

To be most effective, organizational development should include strategies for organizational communications, which involves the development of those abilities needed to link to the broader community and are required to commuicate effectively both internally and externally. All effective communication requires strategic thinking, and as the organization grows in complexity, so should the strategy for communicating (Barrett, 2006; Bavelas,1951; Smith and Mounter, 2005). Any OD intervention for sustainablity should include strategies for internal and external communications techniques. For instance some CBO/FBOs were required to bring in an outside OD Consultant to assist in providing a broader understanding of the inter-connectedness of activities across programs and departments and how each contribute to the organizational goals which in turn provide a rationale for sustainability. OD consultants also assist in the identification of program areas from which to operate, rather than indiscriminately pursuing funds without a track-record of success.

Supportive Management. CEOs and program managers should assume responsibility for relaying important messages and expectations to direct reports, particularly those related to service delivery, program goals, rules and regulations, and funding guidelines. Management in CBO/FBOs need to shape core messages that are consistent with funding guidelines and expectations. Managers should model the communication behavior they expect of their employees. (Bell and Nadler, 1985). Expectations regarding program outcomes should be clearly communicated at the onset of the funding cycle and throughout the year to guarantee successful, accurate outcomes which in turn increases the likelihood of multi-year funding. CBO/FBOs in Southwestern PA quickly gained reputations among funders. Once these reputations were established, they were quite difficult to change.

Targeted Messages. The needs of the key stakeholders are analyzed to develop messages each group will understand. Core messages are a necessity and should be communicated consistently to all internal and external stakeholders. Individualized messages are shaped for key constituents and adapted for the specific audience. All messages should be consistent with the organizational vision, mission, goals, and objectives. CBOs/FBOs should also include in their messages language clearly describing how efforts meet funder requirements.

Effective Media and Forums. Organizations may need to convey messages through a variety of channels to reach all clients, employees and other stakeholders. This requires looking critically at the media and deciding which is best for receiving the intended message. For instance, a message for male teens is unlikely to be read in the local newspaper. CBOs/ FBOs should pay particular attention to media richness and identify the targeted audiences as they are likely to have a diverse population in both funders, clients, and employees. Recruiting new clients can be difficult. Although service may be warranted, building trust is important. Inclusive messages that demonstrate respect, compassion and dignity can assist. Also during times of low revenue employee turnover can be high; core messages need to be conveyed to each employee to retain talent and staff commitment.

Well-Positioned Communications Staff. A professional communications staff can ensure that communications is integrated into the organization's operations. Unlike a PR employee, the communications staff is an expert communicator who can help deliver strategic messages. The communications expert should be involved in the strategic planning of the CBO/FBOs and should be included in the decsion-making process at the highest level in order to "get the word out" accurately in a timely, culturally-sensitive manner. While most CBOs/FBOs do not have the resources to hire such a person, these skill sets can be incorporated into an existing relevant postion, such as the human resources or public relations positions. Delivering the right message is key to sustainability as funders are very connected to the community grapevine and are knowledgeable of the dominant messages (intentional/unintentional) of all CBO/FBOs in the area.

Training and Development. Training and development needs to be provided to assist CBO/FBOs in developing sound fundraising practices; to target new donor prospects, and to build capacity within their organizations to be more sophisticated and aggressive in their fundraising efforts, thereby helping nonprofits become more sustainable over time (Barrett, 2006). Training and development is also required to assist direct reports in learning "best practices" for service provision in accordance with funding guidelines. For instance, FBOs were typically church-based programs and many were tempted to

"convert" clients. However, funding guidelines clearly stated it is a violation of individual civil rights to indoctrinate clients into any religious beliefs. Nonetheless, some staff felt compelled to do so and greatly jeopardized program funds in the process. The penalty for such a violation is severe, resulting in repayment of funds and possibly criminal charges.

Learning Organization. Through developing a "learning organization philosophy," the CBO/FBO can make a commitment to objectively measure and evaluate the impact of communications through benchmarking against which to chart the future. There is evidence that some nonprofits are successfully using quality assurance methods to increase efficiency and performance. These organizations have been shown to: 1) better define their purpose; 2) evaluate and modify their programs; and 3) measure and communicate their impact. They also report marked improvement in a variety of management practices. Some past uses of quality assurance methods include: using logical models, process mapping, designing implementation strategies, and re-drafting agreements with vendors and contractors. They were also more alert to changing circumstances that might reveal the need to adjust an established program, reframe a fundraising appeal, or seek confirmation of an emerging need" (Barrett, 2006; Light, 2005).

Social Return on Investments (SROI). CBO/FBOs may also benefit from creative methods to measure the Social Return on Investments (SROI). Nonprofits can benefit from developing an array of measures based on financial, non-financial, community and management impacts. This information would greatly improve sustainablility and is most likely to get the attention of the funding community (Light, 2005).

Change Management. FBO/CBOs could also benefit from developing the capacity to quickly respond to emerging trends or events. This will require training and responsiveness on the part of employees, board members, and volunteers as well as a degree of manueverability within the organization. In other words, they need to develop the capacity to respond in a funding crisis to adjust to spikes in demand, to adapt to unforeseen events, to take advantage of new opportunities like requests for proposals (RFPs), and allow invitations to partner for new grant streams (Light, 2005). Several SFBO/CBOs in Southwestern PA have joined together to form collaboratives as a cost-savings strategy. Wrap-around services are provided to families through a referral process among "networked" agencies. Funds are distributed throughout the network so all agencies remain viable.

Step Five: Outcomes Evaluation

According to Light (2005), an organization's capacity is measured by alertness, agility, adaptability, and alignment. Indicators of success includes improved and sustained performance, significant budgets, low executive and board turnover, diverse funding streams, access to resources for continuous improvement, mission driven activities, and on-going assessment of staff and programs. Each of these areas should be included in the evaluation process and including in annual reports to funders as an indicator of program viability and accountability.

If organizations measure the wrong thing, they will not get the result or effect they want to achieve. Unclear wording on survey instruments may provide unclear answers as to why programming efforts are failing. Likewise, a fear of taking an honest assessment can result in wasted resources, failed programs and ultimately funding cuts (Weller and Kimball, 1988).

Outcomes evaluations should include hard (quantitative) and soft (qualitative) assessments of the internal and external organizational efforts and be cumulative and summative to be most effective (Babbie, 1990; Herndon and Kreps, 1995). Outcomes assessments can be completed in a cost effective manner using focus groups, observations, surveys, and benchmarking. There needs to be a clear understanding of where the organization aims to be in reference to the outcomes. This information can be gained from funded proposals, government guidelines, strategic planning, business plan documents, and from the leadership. Efforts at sustainability need to be quantifiable and data collected consistently at the onset of the effort or activity. The monthly, quarterly, or annual reports can provide feedback that can act as a catalyst to motivate and encourage future sustainability efforts when shared with key stakeholders. Although these strategic communications efforts are important to achieving success, they should be part of an on-going process and not simply a "quick fix," or means to an end (Smith and Mounter, 2005).

On-going Assessment. The CBO/FBO should evaluate communication effectiveness as part of individual performance appraisals and provide incentives for successful efforts. Also of importance are assessments of the communication process, formally and informally throughout the organization. Strategic communications can occur over time by consistent effort on the part of everyone in the organization. Like their for-profit counterparts, CBO/FBOs that communicate effectively internally and externally, typically are fiscally responsible and have impeccable reputations for high quality products and services.

Delphi Method. Of particular interest for the nonprofit are interventions to address message flow and decision-making using the Delphi technique. Delphi is a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals as a whole, to deal with complex problems. The Delphi technique is used for increasing stability and reducing uncertainty. Delphi was originated at the Rand Corporation in 1948 and was initially developed to provide the Air Force with information on the targets for a Soviet nuclear attack. Since the 1960's, Delphi has been used in a variety of settings to help solve human communication problems (DeWine, 1994; Linestone, 1975).

Conclusions

It is essential that CBOs/FBOs respond to the fiscal crisis by pursuing diverse and creative strategies that include improving organizational communication in an effort to secure funding, improve and expand grant-seeking efforts, and establish structural balance through a mix of sources and methods of increasing the bottom line (Blake & Mouton, 1978). It is important for any organization embarking on a path of sustainability to consider the following:

1. Effective sustainabilty efforts take time and requires long-term comittment from everyone involved.
2. Effective sustainabilty efforts do not simply try to correct an organization's weaknesses, but builds upon its assets and strengths.
3. Successful sustainabilty efforts generally require realistic goals that can be measured and celebrated. It is essential to avoid attempting to accomplish the impossible.
4. Successful initiatives generally begin with a thorough and systematic organizational assessment (Weller and Kimball, 1988).
5. Sustainabilty efforts are more likely to fail if they are not explicitly mission-driven.
6. Sustainability is not the end, but a means to an end. If employees and other stakeholders don't see the connection between sustainability and performance, the initiative will fail (Smith, Bucklin & Associates, Inc, 1994).

Thus, designing and implementing a strategy for sustainability through organizational communications will take time. The most difficult challenge will be encouraging individuals from diverse backgrounds and across disciplines to work together as a team. Individuals will also need to be prepared for and educated about the changes that are most likely to occur. The internal communications expert will need to be keenly aware of how their people consume and interact with information in order to deliver new approaches that can be easily adapted. As internal communications moves forward, it will be more central to the organization's sustainability efforts (Bavelas, 1951). Hence, any strategic planning should include resources and expertise for the on-going development of technical and organizational communications. A shift in the focus to communications as a sustainability strategy is a worthwhile investment best demonstrated by making a meaningful difference in the bottom line.

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