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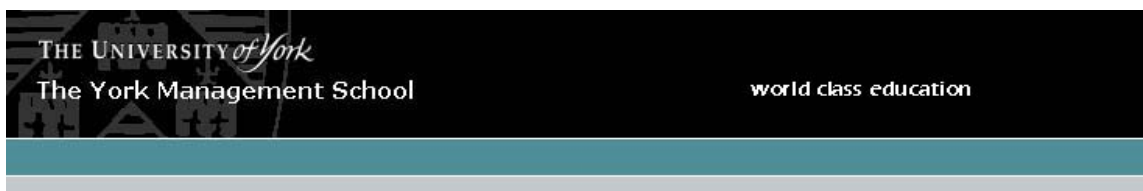
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**LEADERSHIP THEN AT ALL EVENTS**

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## LEADERSHIP THEN AT ALL EVENTS

### ABSTRACT

Theory purporting to identify leadership remains over-determined by one of two underlying fallacies. Traditionally, it hypostatizes leadership in psychological terms so that it appears as the collection of attributes belonging to an independent, discrete person. By contrast, contemporary perspectives approach leadership by focusing on the intermediary relations between leaders and followers. We retreat from *both* of these conceptions. Our approach perceives these terms as continuous within each other and not merely as adjacent individuals. The upshot is that leadership should be understood as a more fundamental type of relatedness, one that is glimpsed in the active process we are here calling *events*. We suggest further work consistent with these ideas offers an innovative and useful line of inquiry, both by extending our theoretical understanding of leadership, but also because of the empirical challenges such a study invites.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership studies, identity theory, process philosophy, qualitative research

## IN SEARCH OF LOST LEADERSHIP

Contemporary practices have tended not to question seriously our idealized view of leadership (Koivunen, 2007; \_\_\_\_\_, 2006). When, for example, we think of 'leadership' we normally consider the collection of attributes that differentiate certain individuals from most people (Yukl, 1999). It is their distinctive traits, behaviors and styles that sets them apart, or grades them as different. As a result, leaders' individual-differences – their personal identities, if you will – are used often to explain and account for the activities, performance and outcomes, of the organizations in their charge (Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985; Yukl, 2002). For example, leaders scan broadly and set direction. They are intellectually flexible, able to seize the future whilst also being politically astute. Leaders drive for results, deliver services and/or products, empower others, lead change, work collaboratively and influence effectively and strategically, etc., etc., etc. (\_\_\_\_\_, 2006).

But leadership might not be explained adequately by these personal refrains. Current trends in the field emphasize the wider context of intermediary relations connecting leaders and followers. Research is now conducted with respect to 'shared', 'distributed', 'connective' and 'post-heroic' leadership (Brown & Hosking, 1986; Grint, 2005; Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003), 'social exchange' theories (Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) and 'relational' leadership (Hosking, 1988; Hosking et al., 1995; Koivunen, 2007; Uhl Bien, 2006; \_\_\_\_\_, 2005), while literatures in communication and sociology focus on a concept of leadership useful to us in 'framing' (Fairhurst, 2005; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) and for the 'management of meaning' (Smircich &

Morgan, 1982). The tendency in each of these approaches is to take a far less substantive view of a self or person in favor of a much more process-oriented approach. The idea is to move us beyond the straightforward, one-to-one leader/follower bifurcation toward a completely new way of seeing leadership. From the viewpoint of these researchers and theorists, leadership is more like a relational field that we cannot fully understand without paying attention to ongoing processes of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967): contextual factors, the place in which leadership occurs, historical antecedents, and seemingly invisible political, emotional, aesthetic factors, and even inanimate objects, which also impact on our understanding.

As a supplement to and an extension of this research, we employ insights derived particularly from the metaphysics of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1994) and the British mathematical physicist turned philosopher Alfred Whitehead (1978) in an attempt to provide some philosophical underpinnings and support for a more thorough understanding of leadership in process terms (\_\_\_\_, 2005) . Principal among the ostensible conceptual affiliations between these two thinkers is the idea of the ‘event’, which we use to draw more critical attention to the social processes of leadership. The idea of the event does not take a substantive view of phenomena like ‘identity’, ‘self’, and ‘persons’, or even ‘organizations’, ‘society’, and ‘culture’. Instead, the event emphasizes the interplay of perceptions, feelings, and purposes behind the scenes (so to speak), which actually produce these final ‘substantives’, in different times and places.

The current discussion is divided into four subsequent parts. In the second part conceptual schemes for describing leadership that invariably become reduced to the collection of attributes belonging to an individual person, are analyzed critically. The multitude of research describing the intermediary relations between leaders and followers are appraised in the third part. Fourthly, the persistent issue of personal identity is reviewed. Fifthly, rather than drawing on theories of personal identity, as the necessary framework for understanding ‘relations’ and ‘persons’, we propose leadership as an active process, involving a kind of continuous stream of experiences, that excels over these immediate ‘things’. Our discussion then moves beyond the theoretical domain, by offering some first steps into exploring these ideas from an empirical perspective. Finally, we conclude that work consistent with these ideas offers an innovative and useful line of inquiry, both by extending our theoretical understanding of leadership, but also because of the epistemological and methodological challenges such a study invites.

## TWILIGHT OF THE ICONS

Public attention, as well as traditional studies of the field, has usually defined identity (e.g., ‘leadership’) in psychological terms, as a collection of personal attributes and as something that is primarily considered to occur in an individual ‘mind’ (Connelly, 1991; Sayers, 1999; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This essentialist view relies upon a theory of self-identity, in which someone asking them self ‘Who am I?’ finds the same, self-reflective consciousness, abiding in different times and places (viz. Locke, 1975). The success of the Cartesian distinction in relation to personal identity is why individuals and not relations, processes, or situations, traditionally are given explanatory power



for organizational performance and outcomes in leadership studies (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985).

Traditional views approach leadership by focusing on individual behaviors, traits and skills in situational contexts (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Burns, 1978; Stogdill, 1950). Leaders employ different styles or are seen to have different characteristics that followers respond to (or not) and these individual styles change/develop over time and depending on the situation (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). This literature equates the role of leadership with identifying appropriate individual paths/goals (House, 1971), encouraging participation, commitment, and development among subordinates, in work contexts. Consequently, it is leaders who impress others; inspire people; push through transformations; get the job done; have compelling, even gripping, visions; stir enthusiasm; and have personal magnetism (Maccoby, 2000). Moreover, the shift in emphasis from planned goals to high expectations, from communication to trust, from traits to self-awareness and from contingency to effective presentation, has continued this work, introducing the concept of personal charisma, transformational, and sometimes, transcendent behavior to the leadership field (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1997; Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Goffee & Jones, 2000).

The key point is that traditional leadership theories, including charismatic and transformational leadership perspectives, focus on personal attributes or individual differences to the neglect of wider contextual forces that also impact on organizational performance and outcomes. Besides being predictable, this collection of attributes and differences only provides the invocation for cognitively, behaviorally, spiritually and

emotionally aware leadership to anticipate and aspire to in the realization of present, or, more often new, leadership behavior, within predominantly capitalist organizations (Fry, 2003; Goleman, 1996; Greenleaf & Spears, 1998; Hooper & Potter, 2000). In so doing, they continue to promote the leadership process as neo-liberal, leader-work and thus exaggerate the leader's role in terms of his or her individual abilities and the contribution they generally make to organizational performance and outcomes. This narrow focus poses conceptual difficulties, however, and more contemporary approaches start from very different assumptions.

## NEW DAWN FOR LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS

At its root, the aim of traditional leadership approaches is personal-identity construction, but only of certain identities. Specifically, to be 'trustworthy', 'credible', 'morally worthy', 'innovative' 'esteemed', and 'powerful' are all especially valued leader identifications in this regard (Gardner & Avolio, 1998: 33). The process of trying to fix leadership identity as a particular type promotes an individual-difference view – i.e., the traits, behaviors and styles that differentiates leaders from most people (Dansereau, 1995; Yukl, 1999). Nonetheless, the identity images of the leader are never as they are, self-identical and including only themselves. Their individual-differences do not assume a substantive view of the same person, a true self, in different times and places. Rather, they are viewed increasingly as 'situated' negotiations of personal identity at a given point in time (Gardner & Avolio, 1998: 33). Thus, individual-difference is an interactive conception, constantly being formed, maintained and reinvented, as relationships and contexts change (Lührmann & Eberl, 2007).

It is for this reason we often hear that leadership is about being followed, or that leadership is not just a quality in the leader but, more importantly, it is a quality that resonates among the led. This is a significant step because it draws attention to leadership as a process of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Shotter and Cunliffe (2003) adopt a social constructionist approach when they relate managerial practice as a relationally responsive activity. Similarly, Fairhurst (2005: 178; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), in her work on framing, draws from philosophical arguments in social constructionism to see communication as the collective 'negotiation of social selves and situations' (Fairhurst, 2005: 178), rather than as an individually based skill. As a further example, in the field of organizational learning, Wenger (1998) offers a social constructionist model of community-based learning, partially rooted in phenomenological thinking, in contrast to traditional individualized approaches.

A process of social construction starts with relationships and not independent, discrete persons (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The implication is that a leader's identity, role, and/or behavior are relative to followers' perceptions of them. Research drawing our attention to these processes of leadership identity construction has led to some influential perspectives (Brower et al., 2000; Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Keller & Dansereau, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Contrary to the traditional focus on substantive, individual-differences, leadership identity now appears to be a relational phenomenon. It is not an individual possession but is rather socially constructed by managers and subordinates in actual work interactions (Lührmann & Eberl, 2007).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory is perhaps the best known social constructionist approach for identifying the types of interpersonal relationships in which individuals operate (Brower et al., 2000; Graen et al., 1973; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Theoretically, what distinguishes the LMX theory is its claim not to focus on individuals (e.g., leaders and followers) as independent and distinct entities. It is the influence and social exchange relationship between leaders and followers, rather than individual leader/follower differences per se, which is the point of interest for LMX theorists (Dansereau, 1995; van Breukelen et al., 2006). Empirically, the traditional assumption that leaders adopt a consistent leadership style towards all members of their work unit, team or organization, is contested. The key premise of the LMX approach is that effective leadership relationships develop between ‘dyadic’ partners in organizational settings (Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leadership is differentiated in a social exchange process that develops along dimensions to which both superiors and subordinates can contribute and that both parties value (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). From this perspective, what leadership stands for is a reciprocal achievement, whereby superiors exert influence over subordinates and subordinates exert influence over superiors in an interpersonal context.

Graen’s and his collaborators’ LMX model (Graen et al., 1973; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) ‘pursues the question of how differentiated dyadic relationships develop, and combine to form systems of interdependent dyadic relationships or network assemblies’ (van Breukelen et al., 2006: 298). The higher the quality of the network of relationships – where quality is analogous with mutual trust, respect and loyalty, etc. (van Breukelen et al., 2006) – the better organizational

performance and outcomes will be. In contrast, Dansereau and colleagues (Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Keller & Dansereau, 1995) use the concept of a vertical dyadic linkage (VDL) to develop an alternative ‘individualized’ leadership approach. According to Dansereau and Liden (1986), a leader has a vested interest in the role performance of a subordinate and will exert pressure on the subordinate in the form of an individualized role expectation episode. ‘Here, the focus is on the way formally assigned superiors succeed in securing satisfying performance from a particular subordinate, thus becoming a ‘leader’ in the eyes of his (sic) subordinate’ (van Breukelen et al., 2006: 299).

Both LMX and VDL models are offered as a radical alternative to the traditional view of leadership as a collection of personal attributes promoting individual differences (Dansereau, 1995). In different ways, both models cast important doubt on this traditional hypostatization. Nonetheless, despite the bifurcation in approaches, social exchange models may re-establish, unwittingly, the problem of distinct leader (and follower) identities by continuing to focus on personal identity.

#### THE ISSUE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

A key premise of social exchange approaches is that leaders form different types of exchange relationships with their subordinates. Accordingly, the leader is viewed not in terms of his or her individual-difference per se, but rather in terms of the relative difference he or she makes in a situation (Dansereau, 1995). To this extent, it appears the social exchange relationships between leaders and followers are the primary focus. Despite this attention, however, social exchange models continue the ‘occultation’

(Riceour, 1992) of personal identity as the source of leadership. They focus on relationships to others but continue to do so from the standpoint of individuals (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This makes it possible to raise several theoretical and empirical concerns.

### *1. Social exchange models assume the distinctness of leader and follower identities*

Social exchange models understand the criterion of leader and follower identities as a result of the structure of their intermediary relations. Proponents stress how these terms are more like ‘relational pointers’ than proper, self-contained substantives (van Breukelen et al., 2006). This way of thinking understands personal identity as an activity, not a substance, and definitely not as merely a collection of attributes. Each individual identity is an acquired identification; something that becomes lasting but only contingently so (Riceour, 1992).

Nonetheless, social exchange thinkers seem to presuppose two distinct people – leaders and followers – who see themselves as atomistic individuals; free standing things that would be there whether we recognized them or not. For example, the focus has broadened to include ‘more parties’ than just the leader, but ‘the processes described are still primarily considered to occur in the “minds” of the individuals involved in the collectivity rather than in the social dynamic’ (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 659; cf. Hogg et al., 2005; van Kippenberg et al., 2005). Here, social exchange models appear to rely on Locke, whose famous theory of psychological continuity defines the self as a person whom ‘has reason and reflection and can consider themselves as themselves, the same thinking thing, in different times and places’ (Locke, 1975:

334). But do social exchange thinkers really assume Locke's substantive view of a self or person?

Making sense of personal identity through change is perplexing to say the least. 'What is a person? 'When can they be said to exist? On the one hand, Locke defines the self in psychological terms: as the same person, a true self, in different times and places. Hume, on the other hand, considers personal identity to be a myth. He can find no evidence of relatively stable personal qualities and thinks consciousness is nothing but a 'bundle of perceptions' (Hume, 2000: 165) that just happen to occur in juxtaposition. Hume asks himself 'Who am I?' only to come across distinct perceptions and particular impressions of himself but nothing like a true facet of 'self' that remains the same in time and space. In this way, Hume might open up the concept of relations of identity that more closely underpins social exchange models.

Against this we might argue that if identity only exists as distinct perceptions in constant conjunction, how are relations between people possible? Don't we have to conceive of at least some 'self-constancy' (Riceour, 1992) across time and space? Lührmann and Eberl (2007) point out the usefulness of being able to rely on and collaborate between generally accepted identity constructions, without fear of having to adjust them constantly. If nothing else, a degree self-constancy, without solidifying into the rigidity of simple self-identity, is useful to us in 'framing' (Fairhurst, 2005). Despite the obvious advantages, however, social exchange models focusing on identity processes between *leaders* and *followers* continue to rely on a 'given' world of distinct identity constructions, without first demonstrating the original conditions for their distinctness (\_\_\_\_, 2005).

Social exchange perspectives define leadership as collective agency, in which leaders and followers collaborate together. Nonetheless, despite this relational tone, the social exchange problematic continues to revolve around the search for basically instrumental interpersonal relationships that still for the most part imply relational invariants, giving the strong conception of things: leaders, followers and relations, which do not change, at least not easily. In other words, social exchange models assume correctly that the criterion of leader self-identity is not reducible to the Lockean notion of the same person, a substantive self, in different times and places. And yet, social exchange theory has still not approached the concrete fact of relatedness. We do not doubt there is an identity belonging to leadership. This ‘there is’, however, remains perfectly indeterminate (Deleuze, 1994: 119). Leadership *is* fundamentally relational and the idea of wholly distinct, psychologically well-defined leaders and followers, walking through life as if they are aware of, but never touching, each other, is contestable.

## *2. Social exchange models focus on the dyadic relationship between distinct leaders and followers*

Social exchange models focus on the dyadic level as the appropriate unit of analysis for leader/follower interactions. Nonetheless, the dyadic structure expresses intermediary relations as a sort of go-between that connects two people, whose distinctness is already privileged.

The dyad (from the Greek *dýo*: ‘two’) consists of two parts. In social psychology, the conceptualization of the dyad begins with the analysis of a two-person relationship. In



chemistry, a dyad is a bivalent formation and in biology, a dyad is characterized by a pair of chromosomes resulting from cellular division. The key point is there are always two. Likewise, the most important aspect of social exchange perspectives is to describe the two-way influence and social exchange relationship between leaders and followers (Brower et al., 2000; Dansereau, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The propensity is to assume the existence of an intermediary variable (the interaction or exchange) between two individuals (leader and follower) that is measured according to any one of a number of scales containing anything from 2-, 4-, 5-, 7-, 10-, 12 and even 14-items (for a fuller review, see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Keller & Dansereau, 1995). This time, the philosophical underpinnings are Hegelian.

In his parable of lordship and bondage, for example, Hegel (1931) offers a critical interpretation of personal identity, ‘for itself’ and ‘in-itself’, which he thinks should not be represented distinctly at all, but rather as the dialectical communication of desire and recognition. His allegory of Kingly rule versus slavery is an illustration of how leader and follower identities bring about a relation of sorts. The gazing of one self-conscious into the other gradually brings out the realization that the full self-consciousness of one is only achieved by being acknowledged or recognized by the other. In other words, the leader *thinks* his or her personal identity is an objective fact, included in itself and including only itself, but instead finds it exists as a communicative self, endlessly invoking a follower’s equally communicative self to sustain its projects.

Despite this, Hegel’s dialectical synthesis offers only a partial solution to the problem of targeting intermediary relationships between distinct leaders and followers.

Although distinct self-consciousness for-itself becomes dependent consciousness *for another*, the factual and objective self-existence of each party is only in relation to something 'other'. Hegel consolidates the place of the something other *against* a distinct self-consciousness and identifies it – this 'something other' is in itself an identity (Widder, 2002). Hegel concentrates on the common ground of the distinct self-consciousness 'gazing' into the something other, as an act of contemplation from *without*, at the same time as being 'acknowledged' or 'recognized' by that other, itself an object *apart*. Thus, the something other and the distinct self-consciousness are both still inherently distinct modes of being and their self-identity has not been fundamentally affected.

Clearly, social exchange models remain firmly within the grip of Hegel's dialectic. Leadership identity continues to be achieved *against* the reality of a follower identity, which remains perfectly distinct. Consequently, targeting intermediary relationships or linkages between distinct leaders and followers is a mistaken starting point because it fails to take account of a more complex and interdependent relationship, which involves the complete ingression of these terms. Once again, the dyadic structure relates or links distinct identities, but it does not account for their distinctness in the first place.

### *3. Leadership research is not geared up to detect or know active processes*

It seems clear from the above that social science methods are not geared up to detect or know the complex and interdependent relations producing leader and follower identity constructions. This is why, in order to be visible and reportable, ongoing

relations must be constituted as already individualized ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ (Suchman, 2005). Nonetheless, what we call ‘leader’ or ‘follower’ is just a label for a more fundamental type of relatedness at work behind the scenes (Simondon, 1992). For example, Uhl-Bien (2006) identifies relational leadership through which social order is ‘constructed’ and ‘produced’. But the emergent social order is taken as an end point, an outcome. It is a simple constellation of processes, reality caught in flight (Pettigrew, 1997), so to speak, and not the depth or dramatization of the moment of experience, ‘here and now’, in which these intensities are incarnated. Understanding outcomes as being shaped by processes is mistakenly to link process with the principle of something to be completed rather than properly to focus on the already complete relation, the very idea of which is that it is in the process of changing (Simondon, 1992).

Typically, ‘most studies supporting the conclusions about positive relationships between LMX quality and organizational outcomes’ are ‘static field studies’ and ‘correlational studies’ using ‘questionnaires’ and ‘self-reported ... assessment instruments’ (van Breukelen et al., 2006: 304). In other words, LMX studies tend to be *quantitative* in design. Their emphasis is on *measurement, control* and *predictability*, in respect of leadership phenomena. Theirs’ is the search for causal laws and relationships between discrete ‘variables’. Consequently, a familiar one-sidedness is quickly re-established in leader/follower relations, as these acknowledged or recognized distinctions become fixed. In the ordinary interpretation of social exchange models, for example, it is the leader who claims authority for the relationship. How he or she responds to a situation or develops high-quality linkages with followers is still seen as their normal role. Moreover, in the

charismatic/transformational leadership relationship, the leader's charismatic/transformational qualities are still specified as a separate and importantly causal entity and it is the conceit that these qualities belong to the leader that continues to be emphasized. The idea of a leader who 'has' these qualities and a follower who is 'open' to them (Klein & House, 1995) does seem to accept the primary qualities in Locke, as that which is for itself and regarded objectively as including only itself, merely waiting to be acknowledged or recognized by different audiences, in different times and places.

We might not be able to think without the selective pressures eliciting causal relations between distinct 'subjects' and 'objects', nonetheless, we ought to be more critical of our basic distinctions and divisions. For example, the resources used in arguments about objects and their variables might not be a necessary aspect of leadership. Furthermore, leadership might be something that cannot be related simply to accounts of quantity at all; it might be something that escapes measure. In which case, we might have to take a step back and look at the things that mainstream methods ordinarily tend to bypass, but which may in fact turn out to be a more valuable expression of leadership than the subjectivity and objectivity encompassed in individuals.

We can try to bring leadership to life by operationalizing a richer methodology than using quantitative techniques (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In particular, we could start to investigate the larger panoply of qualitative relationships, which, in turn, opens up the possibility of different choice points, both in terms of interpretations, but also in terms of actions, which all those involved in creating and

investigating leadership might take (\_\_\_\_\_, 2008). In this way we might widen our appreciation of leadership, rather than reduce it immediately to an essential ‘thing’ that can be simply located in/between distinct people. Indeed, our perceptions might be only fleeting glimpses of seemingly mundane encounters, which, nonetheless, have a certain ‘internal resonance requiring permanent communication’ (Simondon, 1992: 305), and which establish a resistance to being judged in relation to fixed categories and distinct concepts.

The point of seeking to widen our appreciation of leadership’s ‘qualitative moment’ is to bring into view and render rationally discussable the mostly un-noticed, ‘in-between’ factors and background details of ordinary, everyday interactions with others and otherness around us that we are continually using in dealing with them (Shotter, 2005). If we want to examine an individual subject’s constitutive milieu in all its variety, we might start to emphasize joint activity to more fully grasp how ordinary actions contribute to creative outcomes (Shotter, 2005). Doing so, can bring added depth to our understanding of the leadership phenomenon and gives us, potentially, a more complex way of understanding both the possibilities of leadership and its limitations (Grint, 2005).

Having considered the theoretical and empirical persistence of personal identities or collective identifications in leadership studies, we proceed now to develop a fundamentally process-oriented approach to studying leadership as a ‘qualitative moment’ that is glimpsed in the active process we subsequently call and ‘event’.

## PROCESS AND *ITS* ISSUE

Process philosophy, or process thought, is a distinctive sector of philosophical tradition. In contrast with much contemporary philosophical – and management – thinking, which searches for substantial things with (relatively) invariant attributes, process thinkers actually characterize the ‘substance’ of reality in terms of perpetual change, movement and transformation. In other words they regard processes of *becoming* ahead of the distinct *being* of things or substances. The process-inspired worldview is most closely identified with Whitehead (1978), whose treatise *Process and Reality*, was first published in 1929. Other 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers including Gregory Bateson, Henri Bergson and William James, as well as Deleuze, join Whitehead in putting the various elements of our experience into a consistent relation to each other.

The clearest expression of Whitehead’s thinking can be found in his assertion that the ‘passage of nature’ (Whitehead, 1978: 54) or, in other words, its ‘creative advance’ (Whitehead, 1978: 314), is a fundamental condition of experience. In this continuous advance, events are intense ‘moments’ that are ‘continually becoming’ and ‘perpetually perishing’, one moment following another (Whitehead (1978). Each moment, or event, has a certain duration, in which it arises, reaches satisfaction and perishes. Nonetheless, unlike Hume’s series of fleeting ‘perceptions’, each with a separate existence of its own, events do not simply disappear without trace, but always leave behind consequences that have the potential for entering into other passing moments of experience. As such, the event is a contraction of past and future instants so that each event is the outcome of its predecessors and has a tending toward

its successor. Consequently, sense making (Weick, 1995) is no longer of ‘things’ simply as they appear *to be* at any given moment. At each step, perception is always dynamic; a mix of the present event AND a larger awareness of the maelstrom from which it momentarily emerges, even a fraction of a second ago, as well as our anticipation of moments to come. The former focuses on immediate function, the later on wider meaning and value.

Grasping the full effect of leadership always involves both processes. The long-range appreciation requires at each moment perception of the immediate present. Correspondingly, the close-up view of a present event requires a symbolic sense making of the past from which it has emerged and for the future toward which it advances. When the two modes blend together perfectly a wonderful sense of meaning and value emerges. On such occasions the two are not merely intersected they are ‘fused into one’ (Whitehead, 1978: 18). This fusion is what we are describing as the ‘leaderful moment’.

Borrowing from Whitehead, the leaderful moment is ‘a synthesis of diverse perceptions, diverse feelings, diverse purposes, and other diverse activities’ (Whitehead, 1978: 9) that ‘gives itself’, or ‘comes to us’ as part of the *continuity* of our everyday engagement with the surrounding world. Its ‘actuality’ is always the participation with – not merely the gazing upon – of one event in another. In other words, a process view recognizes leadership is *not* the thing, but the playing out of leadership *is* the thing. Accordingly, we should refrain from a functionally driven concern with locating leadership solely in a substantive person, or else in the intermediary relations connecting wholly distinct leaders and followers, as this only

reveals a clumsy imitation that really annihilates leadership. Instead, we should attend to the synthesis of events that forms our complete experience.

The idea of the leaderful moment evidences clear links between Whitehead and Deleuze. Indeed, there are a number of affirmatives between Deleuze and Whitehead's philosophical projects. For example, both thinkers have virtual and actual orientations and each stands in contrast to the ontology of being and a theory of permanence in order to seek the novelty and intensity of difference or the becoming of being. Principal among their ostensible conceptual affiliations, however, is the 'event'.

For Whitehead, events are everything; they are 'the final real thing[s] of which the world is made up' (Whitehead, 1978: 18). An emphasis on events implies a world *in the making*. Rather like throwing a dice, the world arises in imaginative ideas, unexpected turns, and the creative impulses that life might take. The latter implies social life is about change, about becoming something different and not about being measured or captured in terms of a final identity *already made*. For Deleuze (1994), the event, or 'l'événement', expresses the 'groundless ontological ground' of life without identity, bodies without organs, the virtual or actual reality of singularity and novelty that expels as well as creates, destroys as well as produces. In 'a world the very ground of which is difference' (Deleuze, 1994: 241), events 'are forever moving, gaining and losing parts carried away in movement' (Deleuze, 1993: 79).

The emphasis on events begins with a process of integration that produces an intensity of experience, an encounter that can only be felt or sensed, which 'makes something – something rather than nothing – emerge' (Deleuze, 1993: 76), here and now, in an



actual occasion of experience (Whitehead, 1978). Like the intensified sites of over-crossing where the beams of several lasers intersect (Linstead & Thanem, 2007), events create the conditions of possibility for individual identifications (like leadership) to exist. In other words, an individual is never an essence or an attribute, but an event, and an example of what we might call an event is the sensation of the leaderful moment. Its ordinal properties are thanks to ‘the intensities that give rise to it – that make it matter – and to the intensities that are transforming it – that make it matter now and in the future’ (Williams, 2003: 174).

In Deleuze’s (1994) metaphysics, events are neither something that simply occurs, such as an organized social occasion, nor something that simply reveals familiar definitions (permanent identities) (Williams, 2003). An event does not mean that ‘a man has been run over’ or ‘a storm is coming’, or ‘a friend is arriving’ (Deleuze, 1993; 76). ‘The event is ... always missed if it is thought of in terms of essential characteristics (Williams, 2003: 154). Instead, the event is about the cracks that run through and disrupt lives and things, re-arranging familiar identities, characteristics and relations along the way (Deleuze, 1994).

In this way, the event refers to a *discontinuity*, a break, split or fracture. It is an unexpected, anomalous, phenomenon. It sticks out from the mundane and the regular. It is something that takes us by surprise, something that comes to us from nowhere. It appears impossible or unlikely from within established forms of knowledge or ways of thinking and it expresses change, an opening of the future and the possibility of something new (Linstead & Thanem, 2007; Williams, 2003). In a way the actual sensation of an event is accompanied by a change in the relation between familiar

standpoints, elements or groups. It is made up of the happenings ‘in-between’ the identifiable properties of things.

Returning to the example of leadership, process philosophy suggests that an emphasis on the coming-to-be or becoming of the event could change the framework and landscape of the leadership experience. We propose that doing so can provide a richer account of the difference leadership makes and foster possibilities, often hidden, for more diverse and novel choices about what is important and valuable in the process through which leadership is decided. These claims can only be explored from an empirical basis, and our attempt to begin that work is presented below.

#### LEADERSHIP AS PROCESS FROM AN EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE

Over the last several years we have introduced ideas about leadership as process to students undertaking an executive Masters in Leadership Studies in a UK-based business school. Through their prompts, and our own curiosity, we began to wonder how these ideas might be explored empirically. In particular, we wondered how attentiveness to aspects of context that contribute to the ‘leaderful moment’ might be developed. Five practicing managers/organizational consultants, who either had completed the Masters or were undertaking it, were recruited to work with us on the project.

Each of our five collaborating researchers/informants agreed to carry cameras with them and photograph anything – things, people, or moments – they perceived as being inextricably linked with *their* experience of leadership, but which might usually go

un-noticed. We hoped this participatory method (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000) between researchers and subjects would enable our informants to 'catch' the constitutive elements of the 'leaderful moment', thus heightening our awareness of these habitually ignored aspects.

Using photography as a method to bring to life the perceptual worlds of individuals follows the work of Belova (2006), Buchanan (2001), Pink (2007) and Warren (2002), who are moving on from more traditional anthropologic settings to use cameras to inquire into organizational contexts. In our study, photographic data collection took place over six months, after which we interviewed each person over the telephone. The interviews took the form of a semi structured pro forma and asked core questions about how each informant: (i) decided what constituted the 'background' to leadership; (ii) the extent to which the photographic method was adequate for 'capturing' the process aspects of leadership; and (iii) how the use of photography as a method had affected his or her awareness of leadership processes. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. They were not taped, although notes were made during the conversation against the core questions. We adopted a qualitative and interpretive methodology and a rich 'narrative' strategy (Langley, 1999), rather than using surveys and formal coding, to provide analysis and to construct themes from the data that were common to all five informants. We then asked two collaborators to produce single case 'stories', to add vividness to our analyses.

Overall, our selection of the five individuals was opportunistic and unstructured. Although almost impossible to generalize from, this convenience sampling strategy is

a common social science research method in practical situations where the internal validity of direct experience is a more important aspect than wider statistical inference (Ferlie et al. 2005). In retrospect this method of choosing informants did not adequately sensitize us to the representativity of the five individuals or to our own potential biases, in terms of the selections made. For example, we did not consider candidates without the experience of completing the Masters, nor did we consider people whom had not been introduced to ‘our’ ideas about leadership, or those whom we thought might not be ‘up to the job’ intellectually. We do not return to these shortfalls in the current discussion, but it is possible we will try to address them in further research.

In the following section the two ‘case-stories’ are presented, before additional themes, identified from the data, are discussed.

*Gerry’s Story (Gerry is a senior manager in a UK NHS Hospital)*

Having been sent cameras and the Course Director’s best wishes, I felt obliged to clutch these, alongside the mobile phone and Blackberry, wherever I went on the work circuit. However, it was not long before my feelings of obligation turned into a fascinating exploration into the ‘world of the workers’.

Knowing the task that I was to fulfill, it almost became an obsession. I found myself peering round corners into meeting rooms whilst preparations were occurring, and asking for permission to take photos. Three things immediately hit me: how willing people were for this to happen, how flattered they were

that somebody was actually bothering to take the time to find out what they were doing, and how interested they were in the study that I was undertaking. Why did this surprise me? Because, on further discussion, I learned how rare it was for many of these people to have any human contact at all in relation to those tasks – they were briefed by e-mail, or telephone, if they were briefed at all. I heard stories of the completely unrealistic expectations that management had of these ‘backroom boys and girls’ as they called themselves. Somehow they were meant to telepathically understand how many teas/coffees/lunches would be required for a meeting, or to know that projector bulbs were just about to ‘blow’. Why couldn’t they be at the reception desk to welcome people, when they were also meant to be preparing those refreshments, and setting up the projector as well? After a while I realized I was not just taking photos, I was listening and learning and, I will admit, feeling acutely embarrassed at the behaviors I heard about.

Photographing people was one experience, but photographing scenes took me to another level. I had never actually taken the time to just ‘be’ in a room that was prepared and waiting for a Board meeting. It was actually the last Board meeting of that particular organization before the NHS restructures began in July 2006. All of the nameplates were set up, the gavel and the chairs arranged for their owners to take their places for the last time as that group. I took the photos and then just looked. How would the Chair feel today, at the last meeting? What would happen to those nameplates, and the gavel, all engraved and having absorbed the atmosphere of many such high level meetings in many different places? How many decisions had been made, eventually

affected millions of people, by those people whose names were on the plates in this Boardroom? Suddenly, I wasn't just taking photos I was recording history. Sounds arrogant, I know, but it actually felt a very humbling experience. I wasn't just working for the NHS, I, and my colleagues, were a part of a huge, valued, and much-loved institution and everything that we did on a daily basis, from the cleaning of the toilets to the decision about the preferred treatment, was made by people who were totally committed, and highly conscientious, about what they were doing.

*Sandra's Story (Sandra is a senior civil servant in a British Government department)*

Almost immediately, my camera became a conduit to pick up previously unnoticed 'happenings'. Not so much the actual scenes presented for capture, but more the underlying connectedness and relations between people, the environment and the 'moment'.

I became drawn strongly to 'disjoints', where somehow the people / actions / situations did not 'fit'. These seemed increasingly to present themselves to me, whether this was because they were happening more or just that I was noticing them more (the latter I came to believe) was fascinating to me. It was like I'd discovered an alternative world at times.

One disjoint I noticed particularly I termed the 'closed' team and the 'open team'. I had just moved teams into a new section. A 'cubicle' set-up defines each desk within this section. When I asked why the desks had such barriers (I

can hardly see my co-workers, maybe just the tops of their heads when sat down), the classic Civil Service response: “oh, we don’t know, it’s just always been like that”, was given. Later I attended a team meeting where people moaned that the atmosphere was “dry and not very creative ...” I suggested that it might be a good idea to remove the cubicles as this could be one of the causes of this perception. I was told though “they are handy for displaying things like calendars”. I have instructed facilities to take down my cubicle!

Another small but meaningful event I felt compelled to capture was of another physical extension of leadership behavior, that of our micro-managing Director. Opposite my desk is the ‘pigeon-hole’ for all incoming and outgoing post for the Directorate. ...I had noticed that each time our Director passes the pigeonhole; he stops, picks up the pile of post and sorts what he can into each pigeonhole. It’s fascinating that this man never stops to speak to people or do any other relational activity (as an example he says in the front cover of our business plan that he has an ‘open door’ policy but in reality you need to book an appointment via his PA if you want to see him) but he stops what he is doing to spend a few minutes sorting through the post each day. I have not managed to capture this covertly on film yet (and have wondered why I feel I cannot ask to take a picture...or ask him why he does this task).

There is one example though where the not-taking-a-photo became more interesting than if I had taken a photo. Each time I have been to the ‘top floor’ where the Secretary of State and Minister’s offices are, I have always been struck by the comparison between the ‘chaos’ and hive of activity in the outer

offices (where all the assistants, press office and researchers live) and the 'leaders' offices themselves – a veritable 'oasis of calm', with not a piece of paper to ruin the eye-line between the potted plant and the picture on the wall. I was interested in this juxtaposition of power and wondered where the real 'leadership' takes place i.e. does leadership get decided, prioritized and presented in some prior way before it even reaches the minister? I asked whether it would be possible to take contrasting photos of both the outer office then the 'inner sanctum' and initially was told yes "but not when the Minister was in". I was told that I would be telephoned when it was convenient to go up to take the photos. About 3 days later I was told that I would not now be able to take the photo's as it was considered a "security risk should the photo's get out". This in itself was more fascinating than 'being allowed' to take the photo and I have enjoyed pondering on this since in terms of leaderful expression.

Reflecting back on this exercise, I found that although the photos only captured, literally, a 'snapshot' of an event or person, I could use these to access memory and feelings from the more 'scenario-based', cultural undercurrent events I was drawn to (events that could not usually be defined in a photographic sense). By using the 'eyes of a photographer' I believe I started to see things in a different way, perhaps in a different focus (excuse the pun) than I had previously. It certainly helped me re-access the moment in a more meaningful way at a later date than if I had recorded it in a more traditional manner i.e. field notes.



Three key themes arose from Gerry's and Sandra's full accounts and were echoed in interviews with their colleagues:

*1. How photographing de-centered the pre-occupation with the leader*

Most of our informants reported that by paying attention to the 'surrounds' of leadership, the actions of the leader no longer held central position in their appreciation of how leadership happens. They spoke of being able to recognize how relationships, symbolic elements of culture, and even inanimate entities such as rooms, chairs, tables, or even shoes, contribute to the actual experience of leadership. This enabled a wider field of vision from which to draw data and make judgments about what was going on. JR, for example, spoke of how the experience encouraged him to look backwards from the final 'event' of leadership in order to discover what contributed to it from a broader perspective.

Sandra spoke of how she noticed the 'disconnects' and 'disjoints' in a more pronounced way. For instance, she noticed how the Head of her department regularly 'sorted the mail', not the kind of thing she would normally expect to see her boss doing. Similarly, Gerry took a picture of a highly paid consultant doing her own photocopying. Gerry noted the irony of this organizational leader undertaking such a relatively menial task (and apparently, as she took the photo both she and the consultant remarked on how that particular photocopying was the most expensive the Trust would have done that day). That these disconnects and disjoints were noticed demonstrates clearly the importance both of Deleuze's (1994) rendering of the event as something that takes us by surprise and of Whitehead's (1978) two-way process of

perception: the close up view of experience, which is straight forwardly what is in front of us and the more difficult, long-range view, which displays a sense of the past from which these events have emerged and for the future toward which they travel.

As we have argued already, Whitehead (1978) criticizes the simple occurrence of ‘things’ as they appear to be at any given moment as, for example, with someone sorting the mail or doing their own photocopying. These moments are also imbued with meaning: our vivid apprehension of the relevance of the immediate present to the past and to the future. In the current example, these moments are events precisely because they do not show the simple occurrence of a familiar continuity. By contrast, they refer to an anomalous occurrence, in other words to a *discontinuity*. The fact that it is the Head of the Department sorting the mail, or a highly paid consultant doing her own photocopying makes these occurrences stick out from the mundane and the regular. They express an opening of established ways of thinking and offer the possibility of something new, for example: perhaps heads of departments can/should do ‘relational activity’ and highly paid consultants can/should appreciate ‘backroom’ work. These ‘disconnects’ and ‘discontinuities’ draw our attention to the wonderful sense of (in this case ironic) meaning when the two modes of experience – the immediate perception and its longer-term conception – *don’t* blend together perfectly.

Informants also spoke of how taking photographs made them aware of ‘absences’, as well as ‘presences within the camera frame. For instance, in the extract from her story, Gerry writes, ‘I took the photograph and then just looked’. She then writes about how her imagination took her to the future meeting, as well as to past meetings—somehow making her aware of the bigger process of organizational

interactions of which the present moment was one part. In this way, her participation in the absent presence of what was (not) there enabled understanding of leadership as a transitive moment in the movement of the world whose ongoing processes are often imperceptible. In other words, the leaderful moment is done and undone with our apprehension of leadership as the process itself: it is grasped as a continuous creative process of becoming, movement, flows, stimulation and connections, rather than from a series of stable instances. As discussed below, this is not our accustomed way of looking.

*2. How noticing the limitations of photographs also flagged up often missed aspects contributing to the leaderful moment*

In the interviews, our collaborators each spoke of how the pictures could not ‘tell the whole story’ they were trying to depict. Rather, each photograph needed interpretation in order for its significance to be conveyed. Much of this was on account of the relational, or the symbolic aspects that photographs which could not be deciphered by someone outside of the represented context. For instance, GF took photos of his driver and his personal assistant, two people who enable him to carry out his role in the Royal Air Force. He reported how doing this project made him notice more fully the impact these people had on what he was able to achieve; for instance, he reflected that his PA’s ability to put visitors at ease facilitated his chances of conducting business with them in a generative manner.

The fact that interpretation is needed highlights the process reality of leaderful activity. It cannot be captured in a ‘still’ moment, because it is always part of a larger

context. JR expressed this when he reported: 'A drawback (of taking photos) is that you cannot capture the actual image – that is to say, you cannot capture the processes before/after the image.' He went on to note how the impossibility of capturing the 'actual image' made apparent the nature of the leaderful moment as a culmination of a myriad of both conscious and unconscious factors. Sandra similarly spoke of the difficulties of 'catching the moment' inherent in using photography, but went on to suggest that even so, the photographs served as a way of prompting a memory of something, and thereby making it discussable.

A third limitation of using photographs to convey the process of leadership was offered by Gerry, who noted 'Although the photos are good, they don't capture 'the buzz', the sounds and the tension that were part of the 'pre-meeting atmosphere'. These sensual aspects of aural and kinesthetic impact also, she felt, contributed to the overall leadership process. For instance, one particular photograph she took depicts two men in suits standing and speaking with one another. At close inspection, one *might* be able to discern that one man is rather tense, and the other is more coolly responsive. In fact, as Gerry explained, the 'cooler' man is assuring the more fraught 'leader' that indeed everything needed for his presentation is in place. Key to understanding the significance of their exchange, Gerry explained, is all the noise and seeming confusion that was occurring in the background. What she wanted to convey through the photo, was that although a few minutes later, the 'fraught' leader would be making a clear, calm and polished presentation, his performance was only possible because of the previous minutes' frenetic activity. The role that activity played in creating that particular leaderful moment would otherwise have gone un-noticed, were it not for her attempt to capture at least its visual manifestation.

### *3. Impact on the photographer*

One of our key purposes in undertaking this research was to discover the impact of noticing these habitually unseen process elements on those who did so. A limitation of the project for making claims about the impact of this kind of noticing is that our collaborators were already ‘sensitized’, through their involvement in a Masters in Leadership Studies, to considering leadership as a processual phenomenon. However, their comments of how undertaking this work affected them are still worthy of review. In her story, Gerry writes of how the project fostered an appreciation of the wider network of relationships, structures and history that come together to enable her to perform her job within the NHS. She writes that she had the experience of ‘recording history’, implying her recognition of the temporal context that helps shape and define perceptions and interpretations.

GJ similarly spoke about how the experience affected his experience of time itself, commenting:

Like Paul McKenna working with F1 drivers using hypnosis to slow time down – (doing this gave me the) time to notice the background, more time to see ‘connections’.

Sandra also mentioned this affect, suggesting that taking the photos had enabled her to be more ‘sensitized and open to connections and relationships’ and further, that it had ‘switched on a way of looking more questioningly at things’ she’d previously ‘taken for granted.’ She continues:

Reflecting back on this exercise, I found that although the photos only captured, literally, a ‘snapshot’ of an event or person, I could use these to access memory and feelings from the more ‘scenario-based’, cultural undercurrent events I was drawn to.

Using photography as a research method enabled our informants literally to be aware of their framing of reality (Fairhurst, 2005), as well forcefully bringing home the fact that: ‘We never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the *relation* between things and ourselves’ (Berger, 1972: 9, added emphasis). Hence, according to Warren (2002: 235), the potential role and utility of photographs taken by respondents as a method of collecting data about their own framing of leadership behavior lies in ‘stimulating social interaction’. Photography may reveal as much about the life-world of the photographer as it does about what is photographed. In other words the *relation* between photographer and photographed comes to the front.

This new perspective was not entirely comfortable, however, as GJ noted. He spoke of how he couldn’t continually notice all of the inter-relations and connections in order to be able to perform his work as a consultant. He commented:

The difficulty is you need to put the ‘blur’ of connections back in the background. You need to get back to things, but things are products of connections. Also not everything goes back the same way, once you have seen them as a product of connections. Things just don’t ‘snap back’ to the way they were before you perceived them in this way.

## WHITHER THE 'LEADERFUL MOMENT?'

One of the apparent contradictions within the project undertaken here is between proposing the view of leadership as continuous, 'perpetually arising and perishing' and exploring this notion by inviting informants to 'capture' constitutive elements of that process by using a series of snapshots, each representing a fixed attitude. Doing so, it would seem, could serve to emphasize the 'cinematographical character' of our understanding (Bergson, 1983), which, although useful for the apprehension of life, is a 'counterfeit of real movement' and a 'distortion' of the actual world (Bergson, 1999: 44). Using photographs to portray a living picture might persuade us that leadership can be captured by a series of instantaneous views, rather than help make the point that leadership is 'uncatchable' when seen, statically or centered in an individual person, from *without*.

In response to this contrivance our follow-up interviews suggested the cameras served as a mechanism whereby the photographers became more aware of the peripheral, often neglected aspects of leadership. The photographs themselves do not purport to be capturing leadership, in fact, without their informing stories they are a rather mundane and unremarkable collection of images. However, being invited to attend to and take photos of normally ignored aspects of leadership encouraged our informants to place themselves *within* the actual moment and to notice their worlds in different ways. This allows a grasp of the directly lived aspects of leadership, and seems to have heightened their awareness of the larger canvas of social relations between people and things, from which the leaderful moment arises.

A question following on from this observation concerns the extent to which this attentiveness might enable individuals to exercise more effective choices within their roles as organizational managers and leaders. In the last quote of the preceding section GJ speaks of the difficulties associated with seeing the world ‘differently’ as a result of undertaking the project, and how the pieces ‘don’t fit so easily back in the same place anymore’. Does this reconfiguration lead to greater effectiveness, or could it result in paralyzing confusion? How might theorizing leadership as process, as well as empirically experimenting with it as process, contribute to leadership development? Is photography particularly helpful in encouraging reflexivity on the part of practitioners? Are there other modes of representation, such as video or journaling, which might yield further insights? These questions provide rich areas for further study.

## CONCLUSION

Our aim has been to supplement and extend our *theoretical* understanding of leadership in more thoroughly processual terms. We have argued leadership is *not* about the personal attributes or the skills/behaviors of key individuals. Likewise, we contend modern thinking about leadership stops halfway, only securing intermediary relationships between already distinct ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’. Social exchange models continue to utilize generally accepted identity constructions after the fact, without first demonstrating the original (actually ongoing) conditions for their distinctness. As such they fail to take account of the ‘relatedness’ continuously at work underneath personal identities, however collectively acknowledged or recognized, and falls short of describing a genuinely reciprocal inclusion, whose



permanence is change, and where personal identity frees itself from the notion of individual essence or attributes.

In response, we have argued it really makes sense to speak of ‘events’ and ‘relations’ *for themselves* before enquiring about the ‘substance’ and hence ‘fixity’ associated with underlying identities. As such, we have developed an approach to studying leadership as a ‘qualitative moment’, one that exceeds or excels over its constitutive elements. As part of this project, we have begun a process of trying to gain leverage on how to explore the idea of the ‘leaderful moment’ *empirically*. In doing so, we hope to foster a greater appreciation of those often faceless others, as well as the bundle or collection of different stories, symbols and circumstances without which the leaderful moment could not come into distinct, if only fleeting view.

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