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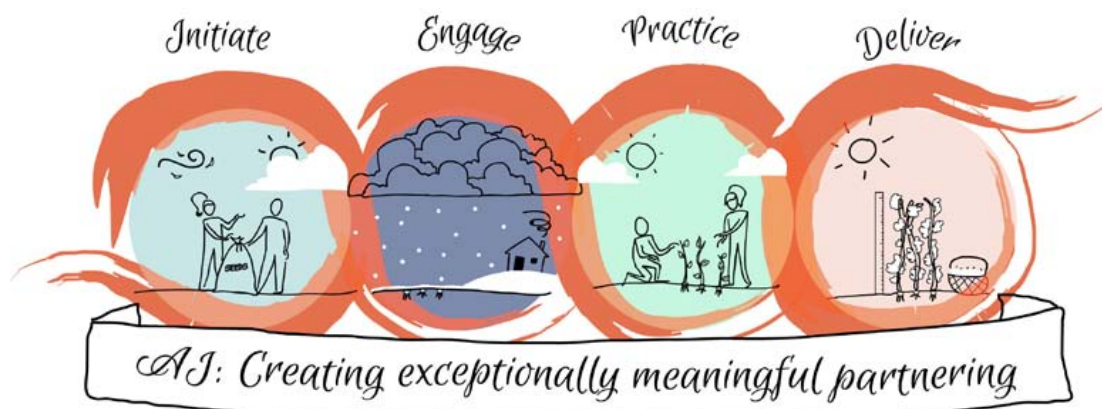
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## **Tukae Tusemesane – Let's Sit Down and Reason Together Enlivening Strengths and Community**

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### **Introduction and Cultural Context**

"Tukae Tusemesane" means "Let's sit down and reason together" in Kiswahili. This paper presents a collaborative project between Kimo, a Kenyan NGO and a US based consultancy that explores the practice of "sitting down together" to enliven individual and team strengths and send them outward into the community. Following the post election violence in 2007 a group of Kenyan

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counselors and practitioners gathered with the common cause of alleviating the human suffering caused by ethnic clashes, the displacement of families, and the marginalization of communities. This pioneering group formally created Kimo in 2014, an NGO designed to carry community support initiatives into action. Kimo's mission is to help relieve human suffering through counseling programs, access to education, and support networks in the community.

Kenya faces "man-made" challenges that are both local and international and present a threat to security and safety. Recent examples include: terror attacks, radicalization of youths into militia groups, substance abuse, ethnic clashes and wars, and conflict over newly discovered mineral resources. Leaders from Kimo affirm that the community craves "share holding" and wants to be a part of the fabric of life and have agency and self-efficacy, but this instinct is too often silenced by conditions of social and political oppression. The barriers to fully participate in all aspects of civic life heightens anxiety and contributes to the continuous stress (Eagle and Kaminer, 2013; Ungar, 2013) that is at odds with enlivening strengths and human potential, creating more urgent need for strength-based innovations. Our partnership with Kimo speaks to this need.

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) provides the action research methodology for collaboration among Kimo, Appreciative Action and William James College. We wondered: When communities live under conditions of continuous stress, what methods are best to help develop positive capacity? Together, we spent many hours sharing our own strengths and values and acknowledging the importance of trust and safety. Then we used assessment tools to help develop individual and team character strengths, we designed appreciative interviews, and we structured dialogical processes to address the question *How do we take our strengths outward from ourselves and our families to workplace teams and communities?* Our partnership with Kimo seeks to address this need by co-designing a learning process built upon the ideas of Appreciative Inquiry: lift all voices, ask positive questions to produce positive change, and amplify strengths (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2004).

Our curriculum is designed to encourage self-reflection about the roots of character strengths and provide a structured process for transformational dialogue. Martin-Baro (1994) tells of the importance of the recovery of an individual's historical memory, especially under conditions of continuous stress and sociopolitical oppression. In our project, strengths are cultivated and refracted outward through a process designed to have people share the story of the origin of their strengths with the team as "appreciative witnesses" who offer reflections to the storyteller. We draw on the field of character strengths using a self-assessment called the VIA-IS ([www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)) that is vital to the development of a culturally relevant vocabulary of strengths and virtues, and yet

central to this project is the idea that character strengths do not reside inside individuals, but are instead remembered in stories of past and present relationships.

### **The Application of the IPOD Model**

We present a curriculum that is an application of the Innovation Inspired Positive Organizational Development (IPOD) model (Cooperrider and Godwin, 2012) designed to elevate, magnify and refract strengths found in institutions and communities. Kimo offers various counseling and community action programs including support for victims of terror, children who are at risk for alcohol and drug abuse, youth who are mentally or physically challenged, and youth orphaned due to HIV/AIDS. Our objective was to systematically describe ways to develop the capacity of Kimo to envision the good, the valuable and the potential in people and situations. Below are detailed descriptions of our curriculum content and dialogical processes superimposed over the three phases of the IPOD model. This framework is an effort to contribute to a better understanding of dialogic transformation and the stages of transformational positivity. Transformational positivity is the intentional use of positive assets, strengths, positive emotions, and whole system network effects to inspire, initiate and better manage change (Cooperrider and Godwin, 2012).

**Phase 1. The elevation of strengths.** While the aim of the first phase is to elevate strengths, strengths often come from unhappy or challenging circumstances. Reflecting on your strengths, even if they are positive, requires courage, trust that people are listening to you and have your best interests at heart, and perhaps the hope that you might be better off afterwards. That which you carry forward as a leader is what you have experienced yourself, and we therefore find it essential to first have a dialogue with team leaders about their own experiences of trust and safety. Together, we then co-create an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) interview about trust and safety for the team. This serves to increase our connection with the team leaders and facilitates the spirit of collaboration. As a Kimo leader suggested, it was like “marrying our ideas to make a better bread”.

Next, we turn to building a shared language of strengths. We use the VIA strengths-survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), a brief, online, self-administered, culturally validated assessment tool that gives participants a rank order of their 24 character strengths. This offers a common language of strengths, such as bravery, hope, creativity, fairness, and spirituality and also provides descriptive data about the team’s dynamics and functions using the VIA team report. It is notable that while the VIA-IS is a self-report measure with a large degree of

transparency in the questions, so results are largely consistent with expectations, participants often report that without an “objective” assessment they might feel too uncomfortable or too humble to publically acknowledge their strengths (Fialkov and Haddad, 2012).

**Phase 2. The alignment or connected magnification of strengths.** Phase 2 of the IPOD model goes beyond the lifting up of individual strengths and asks: “How do we take isolated strengths and help take them to a new octave?” (Cooperrider and Godwin, 2012, p.745). We co-created a set of guideposts or a way of *Walking the Journey Together* as Kimo described our dialogical practice guideposts. As Gergen (2003) reminds us, we are not seeking to establish a set of rules for transformative dialogue, but a set of *dialogic resources*. We emphasized listening carefully to what people say so they feel heard, respected, and validated. This is a way of “being with” the person and entering into the world of their story. This tool invites predictability and equity and in doing so serves to increase a sense of group trust and safety. These are important strengths across all cultures, but perhaps more so in a socio-political context that has been characterized as unpredictable and unjust. Consequently, we find it very important to invite the team to offer brief reflections following each trust story using these guidelines:

***Walking The Journey Together – Dialogical Practice Guideposts***

- ✓ Suspend assumptions and keep an open mind. A dialogue is a shared quest for meaning.
- ✓ Lift every voice. Our intention is to lift everyone’s voice higher. Make sure every voice is heard.
- ✓ Honor our differences. We can honor our differences without trying to reconcile them. Wonder, “Where is our common ground?” How do we walk the journey together?
- ✓ We create meaning together, a “memorandum of understanding”. Without others meaning breaks down, value is lost, and the team loses its vitality.
- ✓ Create a safe place. There must be a “safe container” created for the conversation, a place without hostility or fear.
- ✓ Observe and listen to one another. This collaborative listening position, is focused on listening for understanding as opposed to listening for negotiation.
- ✓ Be appreciative, attentive and respectful, allow space for the other without interrupting and offer positive rather than judging comments or questions.

The team reflections tell the storyteller that people have received the story in good spirit, are grateful for hearing it and do not take it for granted. In that spirit, we have found that it is most fair if people take turns offering reflections and no one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once.

Once we are Walking the Journey Together, the team is ready to engage in an appreciative interview about trust and building a language of strengths using what we call the Trust Interview. It is explained that this is an inquiry into “what you value most about trust in teams”. This interview provides a foundation for all of the conversations that follow because the team needs to feel trust to share their strengths and vulnerabilities. We begin the Trust Interview with: *Thinking about times when we experienced trust and safety often allows us to feel that we are at our best and able to connect to our strengths. When we live connected to our strengths we are more likely to feel a sense of purpose that gives rise to psychological well-being and resilience. What good things have come from the times that you have “lived into” or used your strengths? What kinds of connections are there between feeling trust and safety and using your strengths?* Following this experience, one Kimo member said:

We hadn't thought that trust and safety would hinder or even support the growth of our organization. The process has become an eye opener to the team members who participated in the exercise. Individual strength stories can be an important way of identifying the various synergies and potential we can utilize for the growth of our organization...We can now move to the next level and the members have the trust and feel safe to discuss personal issues.

This practice helped members “to mirror themselves” and the interviews helped the individuals to allow them to be seen as if in a mirror, and the true picture really came out...This helped the paired partners feel free as each peeled his/her layers to the partner and likewise. We saw the reflection here as an indicator of what to expect in the real sense of our team. It will help us to deal with manifest ideas and feelings positively, yet respecting individual differences.

The Trust Interview tool also enhanced appreciation and a sense of community. Everyone wanted to be included. We developed a sense of valuing each other for the common goal of growing ourselves in Kimo to new heights together (Kimo means “going to new heights” in Kiswahili). We are not going

to leave some members behind. A sense of belonging is paramount.

**Phase 3. Refracting our highest human strengths outward to the world.** A pressing mandate for organizational development is to help create positive institutions—institutions that elevate, connect and then help refract our higher human strengths, like a prism, into the world around us (Cooperrider & Goodwin, 2012). This is the most challenging phase. What are some ways this transformational process happens, whereby strengths are reflected outward into the team, and then to the community?

During Phase 3, participants are first invited to consider the origin of their top strengths and to share, explore and at times rediscover the roots of their familial and cultural identities. Keiper & Rugira's (2013) research indicates that within East African communities, cultural context, political climate and family narratives might be especially pertinent. We called the tool we created for this process "Storytelling and Reflective Practice", designed to increase audience listening capacity, transformational dialogue and reflective practice.

First, the storyteller picks one or two VIA strengths they want to talk about with the interviewer (see Figure 1). The interviewer uses the *Cultivating Strengths Interview* and asks the storyteller to: *Think about where his or her strengths came from, were they learned from life's lessons, or were you born with them? If they were learned, who taught them to you or how did you learn to have the strength?* The interviewee tells their strength story to the interviewer while the team listens. This is an example of a *teamwork* strength story from one of the interviews.

Teamwork is one of my signature strengths. I grew up in a family where basic needs were lacking. My parents had to go to coffee plantations to work as casual laborers to cater for the family's basic needs...At the age of ten years I was introduced to casual work. During the school holiday we would go to pick coffee from the neighbors' farm. We were paid five Kenya shillings per day from 8am to 5 pm as our salary. We would put the money together; take it home to our mother to add to her budgetary allocation for meals and clothing...This maize would be enough to feed the family for the rest two months.

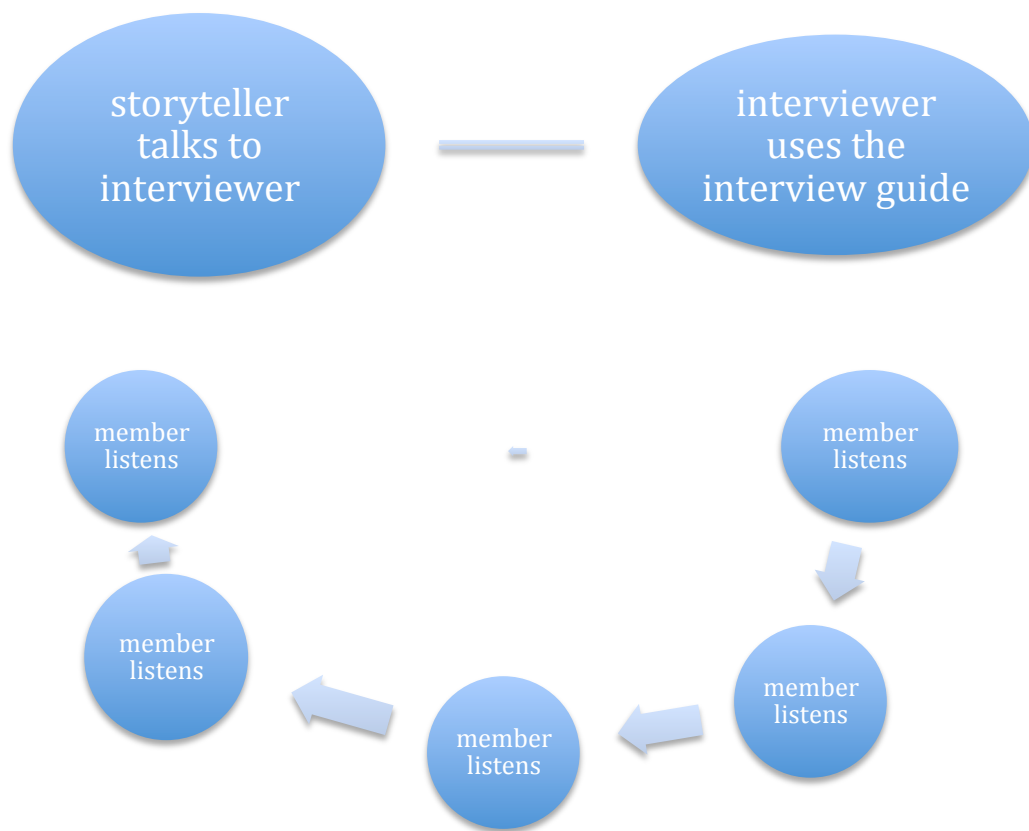


FIGURE 1

### THE STORYTELLER IS INTERVIEWED WHILE THE TEAM LISTENS

Next, the reflective practice unfolds after the interview is over and the team member has told her story. The team offers appreciative reflections about the strength of the storyteller and the ways in which they are present in their work and relationships, again using the *Walking the Journey Together* rules of engagement. The storyteller and the interviewer stay outside of a closed circle and are free to wholeheartedly listen to the team reflect on the interview and the strengths. It is important that the interview pair stays outside of the circle to listen to the appreciative feedback, and they do not respond. In this way, they are free to purely listen (see Figure 2). Each team member takes a turn and offers reflections. With each new reflection, the story gains another wing and flies higher.

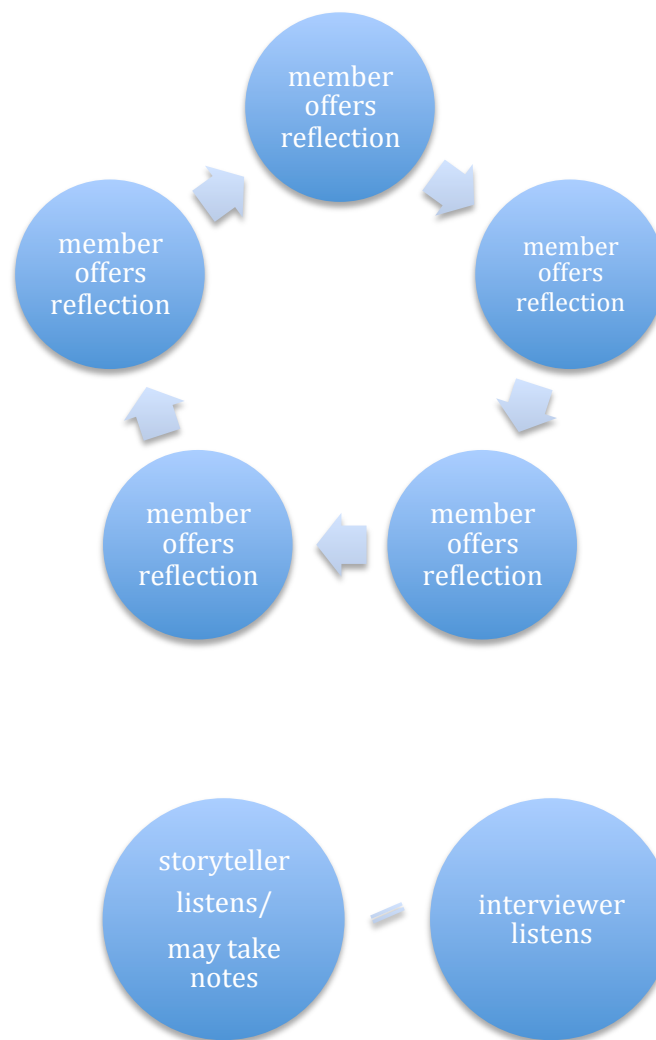


FIGURE 2.

THE MEMBERS OFFER REFLECTIONS WHILE THE  
STORYTELLER AND INTERVIEWER LISTEN

For example, the following reflection was offered to the woman who recalled putting family money together from the coffee plantation:

I was moved by her story as it makes clear the origin of her strength of teamwork. Although I was not surprised to learn this. I had heard about the work she was doing even before I met her. There were rumors about a certain lady who has moved from the Rift Valley to counsel victims of post election violence. In the year 2012, the Kenya Counselors and

Psychologist association nominated her to be the chairperson. She ran unopposed and won twice since. Within one year, she mobilized all the counselors to start the organization, and within the next year we had crossed the borders and many other counselors wanted to join. The faith the team puts in her is a direct result of the importance she places on teamwork. As chairperson, she always is seeking input and collaboration with members.

After the reflections are complete, the interviewer and the storyteller discuss the ideas from the group reflections that were most useful or meaningful. When the storyteller and interviewer are ready, they rejoin the circle and everyone talks about the experience. Then, the next storyteller becomes the interviewer and the process is repeated with all the pairs until every member has a turn. The storyteller has the opportunity to listen to the team have a dialogue about the most compelling parts of the narrative and how it applies to their work-life, thereby increasing self-efficacy and the feeling of “being seen” by others. Linley and Diener (2010) find that strengths can “be an important part of an affective learning loop in which progress leads to well-being which, in turn, motivates sustained effort and leads to further goal progress.” Kimo members said:

Individual strengths help us to appreciate individual differences. This creates an avenue to better understanding and we are more able to work on the goals identified by the members...We developed a sense of valuing each other for the common goal of growing ourselves in Kimo-going to new heights together. We are not going to leave some members behind. A sense of belonging is paramount. ‘Let’s sit down and reason together’ in Kiswahili we say ‘tukae tusemesane’. We have a feeling of oneness. We are united for a common task. We can speak in one language; we appreciate each other’s strengths for the growth of Kimo.

The refracting of strengths into the community in some ways feels like the last frontier for IPOD applications. Gergen (2003) asks, How could they make the organization the kind of place that could sustain the relations portrayed in the narratives? The following iteration to the Kimo member’s strengths story provides an example of this:

The past builds on the future. Because of my strength of teamwork...I have always trusted that everywhere I went I can mobilize a group to positive change. I have started a community initiative to come up with a community therapeutic space. Just to mention I am living in an area where security is a threat. The community has identified a hot spot area near a river where thieves beat and even kill people during the night. Stolen vehicles are being dumped here. The area is being feared and the community has become traumatized. I have come up with an idea of converting the place to a therapeutic ground. Children will be playing and even enjoy boat riding from the river. Some area will be converted to a playground with different activities. I use the elderly persons to engage the youths with cultural talks and prepare them to become gatekeepers of the community. I feel that if the idea is embraced by the community; the stigma and traumatizing experiences can be addressed.



Photograph courtesy of Nelly Nduta Ndirangu

The storyteller ends the interview with an epilogue of a successful community initiative:

No one could imagine, but now in my area of residence one can walk freely at around nine at night without getting harmed by vigilante boys or thieves; today the boys will escort us home up to the door post..... we have come up with an innovative solution to a peaceful and healed community. The youth (people) who threatened the security of the area are the peace and security ambassadors today. The elderly persons who were the target are the source of wisdom that will model the future generation. This makes me feel to even want to live a hundred years plus. I am one who believes in achievement and this reminds me of my yester years. This is a strength that I have shared with my community.

### **Results from Community Initiatives**

- ✓ **Nyumba Kumi community watch.** Neighbors in groups of ten households or “Nyumba Kumi” have exchanged telephone contact information and contact each other when there are security issues. The members of Nyumba Kumi meet twice per month or more if security issues arise. This has increased feeling of connection and reduced the level of fear in the community. Cases of incidental deaths and theft have declined.



Community Meeting for Nyumba Kumi Initiatives  
Photograph courtesy of Nelly Nduta Ndirangu

- ✓ **Playground constructed.** We have cleared bushes to create a child friendly space where children can play and interact. This has contributed to unity among the parents who no longer think in terms of individual families, but a community. The community has a slogan which means “many hands make work lighter” or “Umoja Ni Nguvu.”
- ✓ **Livelihood Options for Families.** Many families in need join quarry works and are digging and selling construction materials. This has brought them food at the table at the end of the day. They grow vegetables on the free land alongside the river-beds to harvest and sell to their neighbors, or keep for family use.



Livelihood Options for Families  
Photograph courtesy of Nelly Nduta Ndirangu

- ✓ **Security team formed.** Youths and young fathers have been recruited in the security team. They have been tasked with the role of taking care of women and children by escorting them to their houses during late hours from 7 p.m. School aged children are equipped with security measures depending on their area of origin and residence and developmental level.



High Risk Children Learning about Staying Safe from Peer Educators  
Photograph courtesy of Nelly Nduta Ndirangu

- ✓ **Peace and Reconciliation Activities.** We started an initiative for youth to plant trees as a symbol of the joy of belonging to one Kenya, “One Kenya, one nation”. The activity demonstrates unity and peace in our nation’s future, where ethnic clashes will become a thing of the past. We appreciate the beauty of the natural environment where the birds, animals and human beings take refuge. Transforming the past through new trees symbolizes the new generation and a national rebirth for Kenya. The children are from different mothers yet they are all struggling to leave a mark in the task of planting one tree together.



Youth Planting Trees as Symbols of Peace and Reconciliation  
 Photograph courtesy of Nelly Nduta Ndirangu

Our community dream is to start therapeutic centers in the free land, where most people are said to have lost their lives. Our aim is to transform the thinking of the community from a slaughter center to a healing center. With time, weddings and other ceremonies will take place here. Youth will start livelihood activities such as talent nurturing, creative art, athletics and even food kiosks. The members of our community will meet here to celebrate joyous events in their lives.

## Summary

The goal of this project was to enter into a partnership with Kimo and create a curriculum for teams in Eastern Africa. We wondered, when communities live under conditions of continuous stress, what methods are best suited to help develop positive capacity? This paper offers a set of tools and processes to develop strength based and appreciative practices. We present a curriculum designed to encourage self-reflection about the roots of one's character strengths and provide a set of practices for transformational dialogue to propel these strengths forward into the community. While some of these tools like the AI Interview are familiar, feedback indicates it is the process within which these tools are embedded that makes the curriculum unique and powerful. We discovered intense energy is generated when strength stories are shared and publically appreciated by the team. As participants listen to each other's stories, there is an emergence of positive potential and capacity. As Gergen (2003) suggests, listening to such stories stimulates confidence that indeed there is strength and inspiration for building a new future.

Our work confirms the value of devoting time to building an environment of trust and safety. Indeed, there is a responsibility to do so if we are to cultivate the kinds of relational practices that allow profound connections between people to emerge. Through listening to the stories, we learned a great deal about the importance of trust, and the strengths of spirituality and hope for people moving forward together. These strengths are no less relevant for people because they are embedded in an organizational context. Some ideas about the transactional nature of trust and the relational prominence of spirituality were unanticipated. This new knowledge leads us to new inquiries and might ultimately be of value for communities living under conditions of continuous stress and sociopolitical oppression, and the building of collaborative governance practices in the community.

We are grateful to all of the Kimo members and the communities they serve who have made this collaboration possible. We hope that we have embodied the importance of appreciative listening and self-reflection and have together created a safe space for the questions and wonderings that collaboration requires.

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