'Living & Working Through COVID_19 & Beyond' -

An How To Guide for Employers, Employees, Leaders, Policy Makers & Good Old Joe Public!'

Preamble

This eBook brings into sharp focus how we can all live and work with the new normal and build back better and it doesn't pull any punches.

Over one third of the world's population is experiencing some form of lockdown restrictions and we are all at different stages in navigating our personal journey to process and try to make sense of what the new different will mean. The common denominator, and unifier, is that we are all on some kind of journey moving through a range of feelings such as surprise, disbelief, frustration and depression, to behaviours that include re-engaging and letting go, learning to work in the new situation, accepting things but not giving up, and finding ways to grow.

It's also so important to try to bring a new sense of rythym in our lives, restore balance, seek meaning, and re-find a renewed sense of purpose.

In four thought provoking and inspiring chapters we look at how the current pandemic is impacting on all areas of our lives and what we can do as employees, employers, leaders, policy makers et al, to bring back some control, strengthen our resilience, be kinder and more compassionate, work more effectively, lead ourselves and others, and build back better.

Chapter One - "Coronavirus – The New Normal & How To Work With It!"

Shaken not Stirred

Is it too early to think post-virus?

Pandemics are certainly not the exception in human history, they are in fact the rule.

Afterall modern humans have existed for about 200,000 years, whilst the oldest bacteria have been around for billions of years and viruses for at least 300 million years.

Things are never the same after a pandemic as they were before, and Covid-19 has certainly shaken the world.

Where will we be though when all that shaking stops?

Recent events only confirm our world is nothing but change and a network of events which never form an orderly queue.

But when the fog of crisis cedes and we're back in stride – back commuting – congregating with colleagues – participating in meetings – what are we going to do?

Apart from readjusting, reprioritising, starting to crank through the gears again, and raising our individual and collective games.

I believe though there is something much bigger at stake.

Wellbeing or Well becoming

Things will be different, a new normal will evolve and settle, and if we learn lessons from this crisis-event hugely beneficial political, intellectual and social changes could and should emerge – And we will have many opportunities!

There is one that I'm particularly keen to explore, and that is an opportunity to start to pay real attention not just to our own wellbeing, but also the wellbeing of others – Our colleagues, our neighbours, our family, our friends.

La realisation ultime in pro-social behaviour, perhaps?

I think not!

If we stopped there, we would be missing a much greater prize, because it is not so much wellbeing that we should be focusing on and striving for, but *well becoming*.

Time for a Fresh Start

We have received a wake-up call, not a nudge.

We have been hit by a tidal wave not rinsed by a gentle Spring swell.

As the new normal begins to take shape and define itself there may be a lag in behavioural change and ways of being, but this is a tide that demands to be taken on the flood.

Before the crisis it was said that 80% of the workforce go to work with their arms and legs, 15% go to work with their arms, legs and head, and 5% come to work every day with the arms, legs, head and heart.

Put another way imagine you get a large consignment of printer paper delivered and the boxes are left partially obstructing ingress to the workplace – 80% will find a way around the pile of boxes to gain access, 15% will move the boxes out of the way, and 5% will not only move the boxes, but find a place to store them and tell whoever needs to know where they've put them.

Before this pandemic what did you do if you were am employer or leader to you engage that 80%?

To reach out, understand what makes them *tick* and identify what you could do as a manager and a leader to make them *tock*, because research suggests that an engaged & committed employee is likely to be on average **20%** more effective and productive than their unengaged/uncommitted colleague. They're also more likely to be a passionate advocate for your business too.

Whilst in a team setting, if everyone is fully engaged and committed the team can outperform expectations by as much as **50%.**

A Suggestion

You need to be thinking about what can be done in the new normal to engage and support your staff's mental well-being, develop their emotional intelligence and capacity for self-leadership, nurture their agility and adaptability, curiosity and decision-making skills, and build their resilience.

Tellingly perhaps, these skills and behaviours, along with collaboration, initiative, effective communication and accessing and analysing information have been identified in recent work by Harvard, the OCED and Fullan & Leithwood, as key skills for the 21st Century workplace.

So, it's not rocket science and we don't have to look over our shoulder to know that the case for doing this has never been more pressing!

Specific and Wider Challenges

Even before the Coronavirus, the number of people in the UK workforce working excessive hours had risen by **+15%** over the past five years.

Whilst in **April 2019** an EU study confirmed that in the UK we work the longest hours in Europe – On average **42.5** hours per week and although this has shortened by around **18** minutes over the past decade, it would still take another **63** years for UK workers to enjoy the same amount of free time as their European counterparts!

The shared reality is that workforces in all sectors have been under siege for quite a while, and the vagaries of modern living have only piled the pressure on, whilst offering no respite.

The Age of Great Acceleration

As well as everything else that has been happening recently, we have for some time been living in the 'Age of Great Acceleration', or the *Anthropocene* as it's also known.

An age that **started with the steam-powered pump and led to the iPad, but after 300 years it is coming to an end.**

In the age of the machine, evolution has moved fast. The seabird took more than 50 million years to evolve from its lizard ancestor. Today's airliners emerged from string-bag biplanes in a mere 100 years.

The next age, the Novacene, is now imminent and poised to turbo-charge *The Anthropocene* and all that's gone before.

In the next few years if all that someone describes to you does not sound like science fiction, they will most likely not be giving you the whole story, but for some time now we have all seen how things have got smarter, as the evolution and reach of technology has got quicker and quicker.

For instance, the telephone took 50 years to reach 50 million users – The iPad took 4 years to achieve the same – Whilst Pokémon Go took just **19 days**!!

And now starkly reminded of our mortality, the true nature of some people exposed by how they act in a time of crisis, the irrelevance of much we thought so relevant before, and with a changed outlook of how we perceive ourselves as an individual part of a larger whole, we have the opportunity to redefine and reengage with ourselves and our workforces.

Not just in new ways of working, but also in new ways of being well and well becoming.

Chapter Two - "Coronavirus – Some Home Truths"

What are we supposed to feel?

We are storytellers and map makers because of a need for permanence and certainty. What though are we supposed to now feel?

It's difficult to feel hopeful in the face of so much uncertainty, and without language and a narrative to describe and frame how we will experience things beyond this pandemic there is a real and present danger.

If the lockdown continues too long, or there is a long-drawn-out lifting of restrictions, there could be a significant impact on mental health.

Even before anyone without a degree in epidemiology had heard of COVID_19, we were already in the middle of a mental health crisis in the UK.

And worldwide over 260 million people were struggling with depression.

It is likely that if measures to stop the spread of Coronavirus are eased in the coming weeks without a vaccine, some element of social distancing, including continuing strictures to work from home could remain in place until Autumn.

So, we're in for the long haul

And then even the most buoyant amongst us might begin to struggle, with symptoms of depression. With a loss of motivation and energy, of purpose and resolve. All triggered by a lack of structure compounded by long periods of isolation, looming financial insecurity, perhaps the loss of loved ones, and certainly the daily stress of living with the *new normal*.

I hope that we can emerge from this with a new set of rules for living, working and getting on with each other better than before.

Travelling less by plane and car, shopping more locally, being a little more communitarian in our outlook,

For **Socrates**, a fundamental ethical question was, *"How should we live?"*

For understandable reasons he didn't ask, *"How should we work?"*

The world's largest work at home experiment

Over the past few weeks, we have been forced into the world's largest work at home experiment and it hasn't been easy.

Perhaps **F Scott Fitzgerald** had the foresight of proposing a remedy when he wrote, *"One should be able to see that things are hopeless yet be determined to make them otherwise"*

Before the COVID_19 pandemic many organisations would have viewed a wholesale shift to homeworking as untenable and Impossible.

And few would have contemplated it without putting in place a major change programme of 12 – 18 months to drive it forward. Yet many have now achieved the switch and made it happen in a matter of days.

What the facts tell us

One recent American workplace survey showed that the more workers were out of the office, the more innovative and successful the company.

Another US survey suggested national productivity would rise by $334 Billion (£273 Billion) per annum, if workers did their jobs from home.

Does that surprise you?

Home working employees are considerably more productive than those who work in the office, to the tune of three additional weeks per year.

After the pandemic recedes who amongst us might be asking, *"What's the point of now having a bricks and mortar office?"*

That's a discussion for another day, because as the French would say things are *insolite* – How it may be in the future is currently indefinable and unknowable.

Time for a new Industrial Revolution

What we do know though is that there are now over 50Billion connected devices globally. So, the past is already a foreign country where things were done differently.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the *Novacene* is now upon us and poised to turbo-charge all that's gone before, and in the next few years if all that someone describes to you does not sound like science fiction, they will most likely not be telling you the whole story.

In 1924, Sidney Leavitt Pressey wrote, *"There must be an industrial revolution in education in which education science and the ingenuity of education teaching combine to modernise the grossly inefficient and clumsy procedures of conventional education"*

I think that it's now time for an industrial revolution in the way we work, which paves the way for new ways of wellbeing and well becoming too.

We can no longer afford fixed or solid thinking and perhaps we should take **Cicero's** wise counsel *menum de tabula* to heart – To know when to *lay by the pencil*, and embrace what may become; because change is constant, and as the current crisis reminds us the future cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty.

Six Top Tips for Homeworking

In the meantime, if you are an employee currently working from home, or someone who normally works from home, here are **six practical, bite-sized** and simple top tips to help you **thrive** when working in the home space:
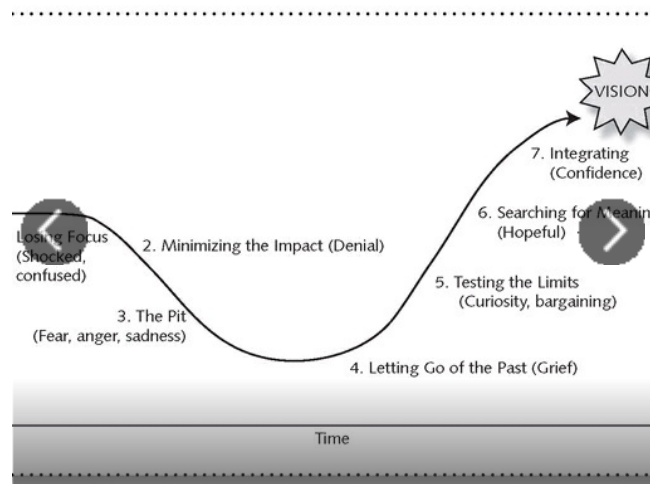
- **Be. Here. Now –** *Focus on your breath – Give your full attention to the task – Avoid multi-tasking and losing focus*
- Take Regular Mindful Coffee Breaks – *With deep breaths notice your surroundings – Then notice how you feel – Let your thoughts come and go without judgement – Be aware of the cup in your hand, the warmth you feel, and the aroma and taste you experience as you take a sip*
- **Use Mindful Post-Its –** *Write on a post-it daily affirmations or reminders – For example, "Today I will… Consciously pause and consider before I respond" – Place these prominently around your workspace, and if you want to go rad the mirrors around the house work well too*
- **Have Pre-Meeting Mindful Stretches –** *Before a Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp or conference call, stand-up and place your feet hip distance apart – Lift your hands turning your palms facing forward and open your chest – Then with deep breaths be aware of your open-body posture and the sensation of fully stretching*
- **Be a Mindful Listener –** *In every conversation, whether on-line, mobile or landline, really listen to what is being said – Give your full attention in the moment and listen for the 'song beneath the words'*; **&**
- **Keep a Gratitude Journal –** *Simply write down three things each day that make you feel grateful – Gratitude precedes happiness and each time you make an entry remember to focus on your breath*

And for everyone, here are another **Six Ways** you can more holistically up your game as the uncertainty continues:

- **Work On Your Self-Discipline:** *It's is like a muscle, the more you use it the stronger it will get – Level the playing field between your 'Present Self' & 'Future Self' with a 'Commitment Device'—And incentivise your actions with rewards that shape and drive positive behaviour*
- **Make Banishing Negativity Your Primary Goal:** *Like the song says, "Accentuate the positives & eliminate the negatives"—Seek out growth & development opportunities—& look for the* Purpose and Passion *in everything you do*
- **Develop Your Compassion & Social Conscience:** You are not on your own *You are connected through family, friends, work & beyond—Within the prevailing guidelines nurture all your relationships, and be pro-social & compassionate in all areas of your life*
- **Manage Your Stress:** *Stress is OK, but work on becoming* Anti-Fragile *i.e. someone that doesn't just endure shocks and stresses, but can actually benefit from them –* Be Present in your own life & ask yourself each day the right questions—*Start from where you are at and what you have got, not from where you want to be & what you want to get*
- **Improve Your Confidence:** *Become a continuous learner & play to your strengths—Set yourself challenging goals— Don't be afraid to* Practice, Practice, Practice *& as you develop new skills and strengthen existing ones* **feel the glow**; *& finally*
- **Listen Actively**—**Communicate Robustly:** *Cut through the incessant noise and commotion—Listen for "The song beneath the words" i.e. practice hearing and understanding what is really being said and felt—And* communicate passionately and unambiguously, without fear or favour!

Historically things are never the same after a pandemic and this one will be no different. We have a chance to break from our old ways of doing things and imagine our world anew.

We can choose whether we go forward encumbered with our old baggage, or travel lightly, with little luggage and a burning ambition to do and be different.

1. Losing Focus (Shocked, confused)
2. Minimizing the Impact (Denial)
3. The Pit (Fear, anger, sadness)
4. Letting Go of the Past (Grief)
5. Testing the Limits (Curiosity, bargaining)
6. Searching for Meaning (Hopeful)
7. Integrating (Confidence)
VISION
Time

Chapter Three - "Coronavirus – Coming Out The Other Side"

Not The Time For Quick Fixes & Short-Termism

During a conversation with a senior education manager about the current crisis, there was a pause and then they said, *"One thing I am very clear about is if we don't look after our staff when we come out of this, we will pay the price"*

Another thing is also very clear, we mustn't allow short-termism to prevail and quick fixes are not certain to be the right fixes when nothing is certain.

Economically and socially we are likely to face on *Accordion Like* dynamic until a vaccine is widely available – A partial relaxation of lockdowns, an easing off in some areas with a corresponding retightening in others, social distancing measures remaining in place and the continuing shielding of the elderly and vulnerable.

An Egalitarian Crisis

A reality of the current pandemic is it doesn't fear or favour anyone.

This has fuelled widespread anxiety and fear of the unknown, compounded by worry for family members and financial security, and we just don't know what the long-term effects will be.

The use of catastrophising language impacts on mental health and the aftershocks from the resulting trauma may be felt for some months, if not years to come.

In normal times traumatic events can leave a broad and lasting mark and not just on those directly affected by events. After 9/11, people who were not directly exposed to trauma, but spent many hours in front of a television or looking at their smartphones were at high risk for psychopathology, including PTSD, depression and anxiety.

COVID_19 is directly and indirectly touching the lives of many more people.

Over one third of the world's population is experiencing some form of lockdown restrictions and we are all at different stages in navigating our personal journey to process and try to make sense of what the new different will mean.

Some Sort Of Normality

Some will be more able to do this than others, but there will be those who try to get through without thinking too much about what will be different. For them that will be something to tackle after the dust settles.

The common denominator, and unifier, is that we are all on some kind of journey moving through a range of feelings such as surprise, disbelief, frustration and depression, to behaviours that include re-engaging and letting go, learning to work in the new situation, acceptance and growth.

If we do experience an *Accordion Like* dynamic in the coming months there needs to be ways to help colleagues, family and friends to un-stick once more, moving forward again from the frustration and depression zone, and onto the learning, acceptance and growth zones.

And if we're employers and believe it is important to keep our workforce connected through this crisis, then it is our responsibility as leaders to focus, frame and provide the support they need to maintain their mental and emotional health, and be resilient, agile, adaptable, purposeful and present.

A New Architecture

As we have made drastic changes to our lives to stop the spread of the virus, we need to take urgent action to safeguard our future mental health too.

Even before this crisis the modern workplace was riven with chronic stress and endemic absenteeism directly related to mental health issues.

In my book 'Uncovering Mindfulness', I wrote in some detail about the impact of this in the workplace.

For instance, annually:

- **£34.9 billion** cost to the UK economy through mental health related absences, with
- **12 million** working days lost every year, costing employers
- **£45 billion** per annum

I argued that if we were to approach this with the right mindset, it could lead to a very different set of outcomes and ways of organising and doing things. With a move away from bureaucratic and shareholder fuelled supersized organisations, towards a heterarchy of flexible communities for living and working where people have empathy, compassion and care for each other.

Of course, this would require a catalyst, but the Coronavirus could very well be just that – cancelling out inertia, the tendency to revert to a 'business as usual' attitude, and the *network effect* – and providing the acceleration that changes the future in regard to what work looks like and how organisations will become.

The word crisis comes from the Greek word *krisis*, which can be interpreted as *"a vitally important or decisive state of things… a point at which change must come"*

Whilst **President Obama's** former chief of staff, **Rahm Emanuel** famously said, *"You never let a serious crisis go to waste… it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do"*

An Opportunity

In my Chapter One, I wrote that hugely beneficial political, intellectual and social changes and opportunities could emerge from this crisis, and one of those was to start to pay real attention not just to our own wellbeing, but also the wellbeing of others – Our colleagues, our neighbours, our family, our friends.

We shouldn't just be content with that though.

We should also be focusing on well becoming. Being well and doing well in **all** senses of the word and in the employment setting this should be supported by:

- A vision
- A strategy that provides a forward-looking roadmap, & the
- Infrastructure

to ensure that **no one pays the price!**

As we work together to redefine what normal is, let us collaborate, innovate and value the use of technology to support wellbeing and well becoming outcomes.

We should never forget though that *people do business with people* and the human dimension – providing the space for listening, connection, empathy, reflection and compassion – must inform and be central to what's put in place.

There is also a need to *think total but act local* – ensuring that what is available is wherever and whenever it is needed and that everyone knows what that is and where and how they can access it.

And What Else Should We Consider?

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said, *"The outcome decides the title"* – So, be clear at the start what outcomes you must have.

And if you are an employer, leader or policy maker, here are *3 Key Steps* and *3 Key Questions* that will help inform thinking and shape the planning and action you take:

3 Key Steps:

- **Create** *a courageous vision – Start with Why? Then lead the How and the What of the strategy*
- **Consult** *your staff – What are they looking for? What do they need and what would they value? And what is possible?*
- **Cohere** *around your champions –* Let the 20% *build the critical mass you need to achieve a* tipping point *to close the gap between where you are and where you want to be and drive things forward; &*

3 Key Questions:

- ***How are*** *we going to be well together?*
- ***How shall*** *we organise our work in order to do well together?*
- ***How will*** *we turn a crisis into an opportunity to reimagine the future together?*

These wise words of the English historian and Lawyer, **Frederick William Maitland** may give some comfort, *"We should always be aware that what now lies in the past, once lay in the future"*

For every employer resilience is now suddenly the priority, rather than the relentless quest for ever-greater efficiency.

Let's learn from this and take the opportunity to do and be different.

Chapter Four - 'Coronavirus – The New Normal & How To Work With It – Just Tell

Me How This Ends'

An Existential Challenge

Right now, leadership looks and feels vastly different than it did just a few weeks ago – So, welcome to the *newnormal* and the challenges this presents.

"The difficulty lies not in the new, but in escaping the old", wrote **John Maynard Keynes**.

With so much uncertain though, we don't have the luxury to choose. We must be resolute, ready to act on that resolve and respond to the challenges with courage and imagination.

There is very little about COVID_19 that we get to control but we do get to control our response to the aftermath.

One thing we can't do as a leader though, even with the magnitude of events being hard for many to comprehend, is cede to the temptation to try and answer the calls for certainty when everything is so uncertain.

We can't tell those we lead how it will end, or even how long it will take, because we just don't know.

But we can be ready to lead through and beyond this current crisis, recognising it as our opportunity to build back better and have the courage to challenge the unchallengeable.

The Reality of Leadership

Even before COVID_19 leaders were hard pressed for time.

And being strategic was rated the most important leadership behaviour by 97% of respondents to a Harvard Business review survey.

However, 96% who responded to a complementary survey by the 'Strategic Thinking Institute' felt they lacked the time for strategic thinking.

Plus ca change?

As leaders in the *newnormal* we have got to be **Pablo Picasso's** *genius* and steal back time!

Over the past few weeks there has not been just a mood-swing, there has been a fundamental shift in thinking from a *'Just in time'* mentality to *'Just in case'.*

As I highlighted in the previous chapter, resilience is now the priority, rather than the relentless quest for ever-greater efficiency.

And leadership now more than ever demands vision, anticipation, agility, quick pivots, difficult decisions, and the ability to ask openly for advice and support.

We must however avoid getting swept-up in the tide of expectation and being bent out of shape by the paradox that has always been at the heart of leadership – The pressure to be seen to do something, even if we don't know what that something is.

And along with time, we must take care of ourselves and create the space for our leadership – to reflect upon and shape our response. To think, be and do different.

It is time for humility and leadership to go together.

To recognise and be honest about what we don't or can't know. To let this personal humility be the beating heart of our professional will.

To balance strength with gentleness, compassion with steel, and to enable ourselves and others let go of our ego and

attachment to the way things used to be.

The Vision

In Chapter Two, I wrote of how important language was as part of the human condition, enabling us to describe, frame and understand what we experience and how we feel.

Ludwig Wittgenstein captured this so poignantly with the following words, *"The **limits of my language** mean the **limits of my** world. The **limits of my language** stand for the **limits of my** world. The **limits of my language** are the **limits of my** mind. All I know is what I have words for"*

The language we use, the questions we ask of ourselves and others, and the stories we create, co-create and tell, as a leader in the new normal now take on an even greater importance which we must recognise. Whilst remembering that the *map is not the territory*.

So, the language we choose to describe what is happening, must also bear witness to the creation of a vision that will realise what can now be different as we build back better.

To paraphrase **Robert Browning**, *"What's a heaven for if a person's reach cannot exceed their grasp"*, and our vision for leadership in the *new normal* must be for *Conscious*, *Present* and *Intent-based* leaders, acting with principle, discipline and heart.

Modelling the way for a workforce *of Thinking Performers – The 20%* – Those employees I described in Chapter One, who are emotionally intelligent & self-aware, agile, adaptable, curious & collaborative, great connectors, communicators, innovators, and highly resilient.

And they don't just move the boxes out of the way, **they tell you where they've put them!**

We're In The Same Storm – We're Not All In The Same Boat

Compassion and kindness can be found in the interstices of the relationships we have as a leader.

These can reach further than words or gestures, creating a kind of alchemy that fills the void created by uncertainty and joins the separate and broken pieces, because we recognise that we are all at different point on our journey & feelings of disbelief, surprise, frustration and depression will continue to drive behaviours as people experience them in unyielding waves and non-uniform ways.

And whilst we can't tell others how it will end, as a leader we should be prepared to provide reassurance in simple and practical ways.

Able to look beyond our immediate self, provide human connection and act with a compassion and quiet resolve, that empowers the workforce and society to keep faith in the future and believe that things can be built back better.

It is a style of leadership that is at once vulnerable and assertive, empathetic and tough.

Softer skills perhaps? More feminised qualities, not uniquely so. But smart, **Yes**!

Break. Create. Transform – A Manifesto

To reimagine the future and avoid merely returning to the status quo, we must become more collaborative, compassionate and humane, more generous, even more democratic acting in a generous ecological way to address future problems.

And as a leader our duty must be both to those for whom we are responsible and to society more broadly.

So, what might a Leadership Manifesto contain. **I think three simple principles**.

Hellen Keller who was born without sight, speech or hearing said in her later years, *"When one door closes another can open, but we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us"*

1. **This is not the time for looking at closed doors**

So, along with deliberate calm and bounded optimism, be a leader who acts with insight and an unbounded vision that provides outsight.

Frederick Buechner, the writer, poet and theologian wrote, *"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid"*

2. **This is the time to be a Courageous and Decisive leader**

To challenge the unchallengeable. Demonstrate an unwavering faith that you can and will prevail, whilst having the discipline to confront every fact. And build and maintain trust, knowing that it comes on foot but leaves on horseback.

Buechner also wrote, *"Purpose is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's needs"*

3. **Rest in reason, move with compassion**

Be guided by the 'Principal of Charity', accepting the imperfect you and extending that kindness to others. Act with purpose, kindness and compassion. Focus on human connection and '*Become the Difference*'.

So, leaders, and everyone else, **Eyes front** and set towards a more purposeful and very different *newnormal*!

"I saw a medley of haphazard facts fall into line and order...but it's true, I saw for myself, it's very beautiful and it's very true" C P Snow

The End

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