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Cross-Cultural Mentoring: A Brief Comparison of Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

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In his book *Leading across cultures: Effective ministry and mission in the global church,* Jim Plueddemann describes a moment of understanding Nigerian leadership style. When Jim needed a large amount of money to handle a crisis, his Nigerian leader asked him to come to his home at a very late hour. When he arrived at this leader's home, Jim was surprised to see many people were there to consult with the leader about ministry issues. After the Nigerian leader listened to Jim's situation, he offered Jim a large sum of money from his own pocket without asking for a receipt. Jim was shocked. For Jim, business transactions should happen during business hours (Monday through Friday, from 9 to 5) at the office, not at the leader's home; personal funds must be separated from business funds; and receipts are required for financial accountability. What the Nigerian leader did violated all the many assumptions about leadership Jim had as a North American.

Just like Jim's experiences in cross-cultural leadership, parallel issues can surface in a cross-cultural mentoring relationship. Stanley and Clinton define mentoring:

> A relational process in which a mentor, who knows or has experienced something, transfers that something (resources of wisdom, information, experience, confidence, insight, relationships, status, etc.) to mentoree, at an appropriate time and manner, so that it facilitates development or empowerment. (1992, p. 40)

Where those involved in mentoring relationships are from the same or a similar culture there are fewer misunderstandings and differing expectations due to corresponding perspectives, assumptions, concepts, and worldviews. In a mentoring relationship, similarity and shared experiences provide an easier interpersonal relationship between a mentor and a protégé and it is therefore usually easier to have a mentoring relationship with someone from the same or similar culture. But to have successful cross-cultural mentoring relationship, cultural differences behind mentoring issues need to be understood.

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The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe how individualistic and collectivistic cultures understand key mentoring concepts and to ponder how to use the strengths from different cultures so that cross-cultural mentoring can be even more fruitful than mono-cultural mentoring. Individualistic culture in this article is defined as a culture that values the uniqueness of the individual and promotes equality and independence. Collectivistic culture in this article is defined as a culture that considers the group's goals to be more important than the individual's and has high social distinctions and expectations.

Mentoring process

Zaobary (2000) described four phases of the mentoring relationship process: preparing, negotiating, enabling, and coming to closure. I built upon Zaobary's phases and identified five different stages in the mentoring process: (1) searching for or encountering a mentor or a protégé, (2) setting up learning goals, (3) progressing the accomplishment of the goals, (4) having proper closure of the mentoring relationship, and (5) maintaining relationships after the official mentoring relationship is over. The expectations and assumptions of the mentoring process in these five stages are different if the mentor and protégé are from different cultures.

First, searching

The most important factors during the searching period are the purpose of the mentoring and the expectations of a mentor or a protégé. In an individualistic culture, the purpose of mentoring is to build up a protégé in a professional realm. A protégé, therefore, mainly looks for experience and knowledge from a mentor and does not necessarily seek for a master, teacher, or a father figure. The first three of Crosby's ten commandments of mentoring quoted by Engstrom are: "1) Thou shalt not play God; 2) Thou shalt not play Teacher; 3) Thou shalt not play Mother or Father." (1989, p. 20).

In a collectivistic culture, however, there is a tendency for protégés to look for age, wisdom, and character in a mentor because the purpose of mentoring is to become like a mentor not only in terms of skills and knowledge but also in character. *Guru, master, teacher, father* are the four words which represent well who a mentor should be in a collectivistic culture. A mentor is a wise expert and has answers, not only on the subject matter, but also on the issues of life. In a collectivistic culture, when a protégé respects the mentor fully the protégé treats the mentor as a guru by acknowledging their authority; a deep desire of learning from the mentor positions the mentor as a teacher; and the high value of taking good care of a protégé makes the mentor a mother or a father figure.

Krallmann (2002) warns about paternalism and over-protectiveness in a mentoring relationship in an individualistic culture. He argues that paternalism should only serve a temporary purpose in the beginning of the relationship and help a protégé to grow fully individually without protection of a mentor. However, in a collectivistic culture a mentor who is not protecting a protégé like a father is not a good mentor. Therefore, unless the expectations and assumptions regarding the purpose of the mentor and mentoring process are clearly understood, a cross-cultural mentoring relationship could cause confusion, misunderstanding, and hurt for both parties.

The expectations of mentoring in a collectivistic culture fit better in a ministry setting because in that setting character is more important than knowledge and a holistic approach to building up people is more desirable. In that setting mentoring can be described as people being influenced by the messenger more than the message. Caution should be taken when caring for and protecting a protégé so that a protégé learns to depend on God rather than a mentor.

Second, setting up goals

In an individualistic culture it is desirable to have clear but difficult and challenging goals set within a time frame in the mentoring process so that the goals can be measured. Vague goals should be avoided because they are hardly measurable and

it is difficult to evaluate whether they have been achieved (Zeus & Skiffington, 2000). Goals should be negotiated between a mentor and a protégé in the early stage of mentoring so that both parties agree about the direction of the mentoring process and what it aims to accomplish.

However, the collectivistic mindset works differently. A mentor knows better what a protégé should learn simply because a mentor is an expert in the subject area. The goals are then established in a mentor's mind, and a protégé respects the mentor, trusting them to do their best to advise and to share their knowledge and wisdom. There is no concept of negotiating mentoring goals between a mentor and a protégé.

The best scenario in an individualistic culture is that a protégé knows what is best for them and achieves it with the mentor's help. The worst outcome is that a protégé does not receive the best simply because a mentor and a protégé are not in agreement with what is best. The best scenario in a collectivistic culture is that a protégé receives the best because a mentor knows exactly what is best for the protégé. The worst outcome in a collectivistic culture is that a protégé cannot get what they really need because the mentor does not know what the best should be.

Third, progressing the goals

In an individualistic culture it is recommended that the mentoring process be divided into manageable chunks, logical segments, or small goals for the purpose of regular evaluation. Regular evaluation ensures that goals are completed. These segments provide a minor closure for a set of accomplishments (Stanley & Clinton, 1992). Documentation of the mentoring process is important because the documentation itself becomes the tool for reviewing the mentoring process, responding to potential complaints, outlining expectations, providing periodic assessment, recording benefits and outcomes, detecting when to end the mentoring relationship, and bringing attention to certain issues or events (Johnson & Ridley, 2008; Williams, 2005). What works and what does not work can also be identified during the regular evaluations. If things do not work out well or the expectations of either the mentor or the protégé are not met, the mentoring relationship can end without significantly damaging the relationship.

In a collectivist culture, a mentor is expected to measure progress and give the protégé feedback on their progress. Documentation is only used to back up legal issues where there is no relationship or no trust has been built between parties. Therefore, in a collectivist culture documentation of the mentoring process is viewed as lack of trust.

In an individualistic culture, documenting and measuring the mentoring process provides a chance to review goals, objectives, and relations. In a collectivistic culture, unless a mentor faithfully measures the protégé's progress through proper feedback, there is the danger of missing a direction or not knowing how the mentoring is progressing and where the mentoring relationship is heading. This poses a weakness in mentoring in a collectivist culture.

Fourth, closure

At the beginning of a mentoring relationship in an individualistic culture it is recommended to have an end in mind (Stanley & Clinton, 1992; Zaobary, 2000). A mentor and a protégé negotiate or agree upon the closure time. Successful closure is when the learning goals are met and allows time to acknowledge accomplishments and celebrates milestones.

In a collectivistic culture it is a mentor's job to know when mentoring should end. There is a saying in Korean, "Go down from a mountain," which is what a mentor says to a protégé when the mentor decides the protégé has accomplished all the goals. There is no concept in a protégé's mind to negotiate or initiate when to "leave the mountain"; doing so would show disrespect to a mentor.

In an individualistic culture, if the protégé is not aware that they still have things to learn, the mentoring relationship could end without them obtaining the full benefit. A similar danger also ex-

ists in a collectivistic culture if the mentor does not want to teach or to share knowledge and wisdom, since because of respect the protégé cannot demand to learn more.

Fifth, after closure

In an individualistic culture, a successfully closed mentoring relationship is marked by a satisfactory end and by the beginning of a peer friendship (Stanley & Clinton, 1992; Johnson & Ridley, 2008). The ongoing peer relationship allows for occasional mentoring moments. Krallmann (2002) emphasizes the importance of the mentoring relationship becoming a friendship at the close of the mentoring process; an ongoing mentoring relationship is not recommended when there is no more progress made and both parties meet merely for the sake of meeting. Stanley and Clinton describe a mentoring relationship without end as vertical mentoring. "Vertical mentoring that has no clear end in mind will usually dwindle to nothing with uneasy feelings on the part of both people." (1992, p. 207)

However, in a collectivistic culture, even though an active mentoring relationship ends, the relationship will never be a peer friendship because to have an equal relationship is viewed as disrespect by the former mentor even though the official mentoring relationship has ended. Once someone is a mentor to a protégé, that person is their mentor for life; the respect given to the mentor and the nature of the relationship remain the same. If a former protégé treats a former mentor as a colleague or friend, the former protégé is considered rude and that protégé will lose the respect of their peers and of the mentor.

Other related key concepts

Here we will examine other key concepts related to mentoring in both individualistic and collectivist cultures in order to further examine the differences, strengths and benefits.

Understanding of personhood

There is no universally accepted cultural definition of *personhood*. The concept of boundary, however, sheds light on the understanding of personhood in an individualistic culture. Cloud and Townsend state:

> Boundaries define us. They define what am I and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership… Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom. If I know where my yard begins and ends, I am free to do with it what I like. Taking responsibility for my life opens up many different options. However, if I do not "own" my life, my choice and options become very limited. (1992, p. 29)

In an individualistic culture an independent person with clear boundaries is praised as a responsible person. The Merriam-Webster online English dictionary defines a person as "human, individual – sometimes used in combination especially by those who prefer to avoid *man* in compounds applicable to both sexes." As this definition shows, there is no communal meaning of a person in English, which reflects the Western conception of a person as an individual with clear boundaries.

In contrast, collectivistic culture sees personhood in a dyadic relationship, which means a person exists and has meaning only in relation to the other person. For example, in the Tagalog language of the Philippines, the term for "fellow man" is *kapwa*. This word implies the core assumption of ego that exists in relation to someone else. Without another person, *kapwa* does not exist. Another concept of personhood is represented in the Tagalog word *sakop*, which denotes a member of a social group.

> In Philippine culture, the value of the sakop is over that of the individual. Because the sakop prevails over the individual, the main Filipino virtue is *pakikipagkapwa*, which roughly translated means "to be related to others." It comes from *pakiki*, which denotes a continuing act of reciprocal action with *kapwa* (fellow being). This word embraces

> all forms of *paki* such as *pakikisama* (being-along-with), *pakikiisa* (being-one-with), *pakikibagay* (in-consonance-with), etc. (Andres, 1991, p. 271)

Koreans usually use the words "we," "ours," or "us" when they mean "I," "my," or "me." Koreans seldom say "my house," "my village," or "my store." Instead, they say "our house," "our village," or "our store." When a Korean says "our wife," that does not mean that more than one man claims her as wife but simply means "my wife." The collectivistic mindset is reflected in the language.

Chinese writing is logogrammatic, in which meaning and philosophy is represented in the form of the character. The Chinese character for "man" is 人: two sticks leaning against each other, each stick representing a person. Therefore, the Chinese character for "person" implies that a person cannot stand alone but needs others to stand together and support them. Chinese worldview clearly shows the concept of personhood in the context of a social being.

Unless the mentoring only intends to pass on knowledge, mentoring relationships require sharing a deep level of understanding. Accordingly, if a cross-cultural mentoring relationship involves sharing life together, it is important to take time at the beginning to understand each other's different understandings of personhood. Unless the mentor and protégé clearly understand their different assumptions of personhood, the mentoring relationship will not develop well and could result in serious misunderstandings. For example, in a collectivistic mindset, once the relationship between a mentor and protégé has been built, the dyadic relationship will be expected to go to a deep level, which to someone in an individualistic mindset could be viewed as co-dependency. Many scholars from individualistic cultures warn against the negative impact of dependency in a mentoring relationship (Whitmore, 2002; Krallmann, 2002). In an individualistic mindset, the mentoring relationship should have healthy boundaries for the individuals while allowing some influence in the mentoring area. A collectivistic person might view such a mentoring relationship as a surface-level relationship since a dyadic relationship is not created.

Differing understanding of personhood is one of the areas to overcome in a cross-cultural mentoring relationship. Dyadic relationships that allow maximum influence and access to both parties can offer more benefit than an individualistic relationship, not only to the protégé but also to the mentor. A protégé learns and obtains the best of what a mentor can offer, and a mentor gains respect and honor.

Power

It is unavoidable to have power differential in a mentoring relationship because mentors usually have more knowledge, experience, wisdom, authority, and other resources. In an individualistic culture, there is always an effort to level-off power differences. Zeus and Skiffington describe the mentoring relationship as being collaborative. "Modern mentoring relationships… are based on a more mutual, equal and collaborative learning alliance" (2000, p. 17). Whitmore (2002) talks disparagingly about having a hierarchical mentoring relationship which produces dependency, powerlessness, a child-like protégé, and an autocratic mentor.

However, in a collectivistic culture, having the proper hierarchical relationship creates a safe and rich mentoring environment. Without a hierarchical relationship between the mentor and protégé there is no order in the relationship. In a collectivistic culture, if the power differential is denied you may lose credibility and respect, which will lead to no authority in the relationship, which means, furthermore, that nothing will be done and that the relationship will be confused. "When a mentor refuses to accept power and use authority constructively, the power of their position is inadvertently diminished" (Johnson and Ridley, 2008, p. 121). In a collectivistic culture it is important to set the appropriate power differential and know how to properly manage substantial differences in power.

Influence

One aspect of power that is played out in a mentoring relationship is influence. A protégé allows influence from the mentor out of respect for them or for potential benefits for themselves. Hendricks brings up a very interesting point about the granting of influence and power in a mentoring relationship.

> Mentoring is all about influence—one man influencing another. But influence, by its very nature, is rooted in the issue of power. If I influence you, it's because you are granting me the power to influence you. When you let someone mentor you, you are granting him the power to affect your life. (1995, p. 114)

Krallmann talks about the interrelation between relationship and influence:

> As we are with people and really get to know them, the more intimately we relate to them, the more profoundly we can influence them; the closer the contact the stronger the impact. Before we can claim attention, we must first gain credibility. Broad knowledge, great talents and subtle strategies on our part will not avail much if we fail to win people's trust. (2002, p. 149)

Therefore, in general, how much influence a mentor can have over a protégé is affected by how much a protégé respects and trusts their mentor.

Admiration, idealization and identification

When a protégé respects and trusts a mentor and considers them to be a model, a protégé admires, idealizes, and identifies with the mentor. Through that process, a protégé learns and internalizes the skills, knowledge, and character of their mentor. Johnson and Ridley discuss the process beyond idealization and identification.

> Protégés may need to idealize their mentors early in the relationship. Initially it can be the gateway to healthy identification, but idealization poses some significant problems if protégés get stuck there. After identification, protégés can move to individuation as a mature and separate professional. For this process to unfold, mentors must learn to gracefully tolerate protégé idealization. (2008, p. 59)

This is possible in an individualistic culture. However, it is not possible in a collectivistic culture because to stop admiring and idealizing a mentor indicates a broken relationship between the protégé and mentor.

Coercion

In an individualistic culture, imposing the mentor's values is considered coercion and the removal of freedom of the protégé to respect the individual's right, autonomy, and personhood. Therefore, a mentor could suggest options and a protégé is the one who decides. In a collectivistic culture, however, a mentor is considered the one who knows best. If a mentor does not impose what is best for the protégé for the benefit of the protégé, that communicates to the protégé their indifference or a lack of desire to share and teach, which, if repeated, could lead to the end of the relationship. Therefore, in a collectivistic culture, positive coercion for the benefit of the protégé is considered very valuable because it reduces the number of mistakes a protégé will make.

Reflective power

Using a mentor's status and power for the protégé's benefit is called *reflective power* (Johnson and Ridley, 2008). Reflective power can open doors that protégés do not know exist and cannot open for themselves. The mentor's proper use of reflective power on behalf of their protégé can be an effective advocacy for making connections to the right people, removing barriers, providing a stepping-stone, and bringing resources. This concept is very important in both individualistic and collectivist cultures, but especially in the collectivistic culture, in which relationships go deeper.

Nationality

A cross-cultural mentoring relationship exists when the mentor and protégé are different nationalities. The power differential among nationalities is usually parallel to the economic development of a nation. The nationalities of the mentor and protégé can be a powerful factor in the cross-cultural mentoring relationship. However, there can be a reverse power differential in regard to nationality. If people from a less economically developed country are always considered right or are being protected regardless of the situation, then these people could have more power. This complicates the power differential issue. Hence, all the different aspects of power need to be examined in the cross-cultural mentoring relationship to understand how power is being played out.

Admiration, idealization, positive coercion, and active advocacy are the strengths in a collectivistic culture. The ideal power differential brings harmony and balance of respect shown to a mentor and their care for the protégé. At the same time, the concept of leveraging power in an individualistic culture brings the benefit of prohibiting misuse of power. The issue in a cross-cultural mentoring environment is not either/or but both/and, namely, to use the strengths from a collectivistic culture and at the same time to use the benefits from an individualistic culture.

Privacy and vulnerability

Privacy is defined by culture and what is considered private differs from culture to culture. Some cultures consider information about age and income to be private but consider sharing about a stepmother or stepchildren as open information. In contrast, some cultures need to know the age of a person to begin a conversation because they need to choose an appropriate form of respect to address them. Without knowing age, there is no way to converse. In that culture, age cannot be private information. And having a stepmother or stepchildren could be viewed as very shameful information that would not be shared unless the relationship is intimate.

Sharing personal information creates intimacy, connection, and trust in the relationship. Closer relationships foster true caring, emotional involvement, and a positive teaching and learning environment. In a mentoring relationship the mentor and protégé are expected to develop a close relationship. Knowing how to build such a relationship without violating privacy depends on having a clear understanding each others' cultural concept of privacy.

Time

One example of the privacy issue is time. Individualistic culture treats time as a commodity that can be saved or wasted. Time is considered measurable, inelastic, irreversible, and irreplaceable. Time is segmented for work or leisure. Therefore, people guard their time and respect other people's time by keeping scheduled events on time. A mature person is a good steward of time. Stanley and Clinton stress the importance of planning and managing time in a mentoring process. "Set realistic time limits. Have exit points where both parties can leave without bad relations. Have open doors where the invitation to continue can be open. Recognize the necessity of a time limit in any mentoring situation." (1992, p. 205)

Collectivistic culture, on the other hand, does not consider time as property or as segmented. Therefore, work can be combined with leisure. Having a close relationship in a mentoring relationship means one's time should not be guarded, nor should there be a concept of "invasion of time." Scheduling time for mentoring is a foreign concept. Mentoring can happen at anytime, and a mentor should be available for help to a protégé at anytime if the mentor is serious about mentoring. If a mentor guards their time from a protégé, it communicates that they are selfish or not interested in a protégé's learning.

Transparency and vulnerability

In an individualistic culture honesty, transparency, and vulnerability are highly valued concepts. Therefore, mentors are highly regarded when they

share their failures, weaknesses, and struggles and their protégé might then feel very close to them. A protégé can learn from a mentor's failures and mistakes, and it provides an opportunity to acknowledge human limitations. When a mentor admits things he or she doesn't know, it communicates that the mentor is being honest and transparent, and it helps protégés to feel at ease about their own inabilities and to have a realistic perspective (Williams, 2005; Biehl, 1996; Engstrom, 1989).

However, in the collectivistic culture, having transparency does not necessarily mean sharing failures but rather that the mentor is being the same person both in private and in public. A mentor will be cautious in sharing about their failures and in answering questions for which they do not have good answers, for a mentor might then lose the respect of their protégé, or a protégé might consider that there is not much to learn from a mentor if they failed in a critical area. This does not mean that a mentor should be dishonest about their failures and weaknesses; it means that there are appropriate ways to show vulnerability that differ from those in individualistic culture. Therefore, it is important to know how much to disclose and to be appropriately vulnerable. As Chan discusses:

> Certainly, inappropriate self-disclosure could result in boundary violations and interfere with healthy functioning of the relationship (Psychopathology Committee of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 2001). It is important to note that the mentors in this study did not indiscriminately disclose personal information and did not burden their students with unnecessary information. To varying degrees, the mentors maintained personal boundaries and limits in terms of how much they chose to disclose. (2008, p. 179)

In both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, maintaining a balance between appropriate boundaries and being open and vulnerable is an art for the mutual benefit of the mentoring relations. Walls that are too high can result in a closed relationship, but inappropriate self-disclosure can create an inadequate mentoring relationship. The strength of the individualistic culture is that a mentor vulnerably shares their failures to help a protégé mature and not to make the same mistakes. The strength that collectivistic culture offers the mentoring relationship is allowing a protégé access to their mentor's life without time restriction.

Feedback

Giving feedback is a very important tool in a mentoring relationship to build up the protégé. Positive feedback builds the protégé's confidence and self-esteem, while negative feedback provides the protégé an opportunity to do things differently in the future. In an individualistic culture the suggested way to give negative feedback is to be authentic, candid, direct, and specific, focusing on behaviors, not personality (Zaobary, 2000; David, 1991). "Beating around the bush" or being diplomatic or tactful are not encouraged especially in giving negative feedback. Rather, tough honesty is recommended. This works well in an individualistic culture. Yet, in a collectivistic culture, direct and specific negative feedback could result in the end of the relationship unless great caution is applied. People in a collectivistic culture have a tendency to think holistically (Rosinski, 2003, p. 56); hence action, work, and words are a part of a person. When negative feedback or criticism is given inappropriately, personhood is attacked. If repeated, the relationship could end.

Giving feedback of affirmation and encouragement is very important in a mentoring relationship. How to effectively affirm and encourage, however, differs from culture to culture. Some cultures seize every opportunity to give affirmation. On the other hand, repetition of similar affirmation or improper affirmation may be considered insincere affirmation in other cultures.

> Praise insincerely or gratuitously given is hollow indeed and does more harm than good, for phoneyness and manipulation are far more readily recognized than the perpetrators realize. They cheapen the perpetrator

> and damage relationships and trust. Even authentic praise can cause difficulty. The person being praised may surrender their ability and willingness to self-assess to the giver of praise, and thereby increase their dependence on the opinions of others. We need to do the opposite, to build the autonomy and self-reliance of our staff. Praise must simultaneously be generous, genuine and judicious. (Whitmore, 2002, p. 140)

Some cultures value actions more than words. In such cultures, what is most important is demonstrated by action not by words and affirming words might be considered empty praise. Rather, affirmation or providing feedback by example or modeling through life speaks louder than the words. For example, giving a protégé a high-profile assignment communicates more clearly than giving affirming verbally feedback. When a protégé fails, a mentor could encourage him or her by giving them another chance rather than encouraging a protégé by uplifting words. Showing faith in the protégé by acknowledging character, ability, judgment, and potential can be a more significant form of encouragement and affirmation. In some cultures, eating together or giving a gift can also be significant tools for encouragement and acceptance in the relationship.

In an individualistic culture, public affirmation builds up confidence and self-esteem. However, in a collectivistic culture, affirming a protégé in public may embarrass them and create jealousy in others. It might be more effective to praise a protégé before others in the absence of the protégé.

It is an art to know how to communicate feedback effectively in a cross-cultural mentoring relationship. Excessive praise might create a protégé that is overly confident, and withholding praise may make a protégé feel devalued or make them blind to their strengths. Both a mentor and a protégé should strive to learn how to affirm, encourage, and confront in a culturally appropriate way to bring out the full benefits of a cross-cultural mentoring relationship.

Conclusion

While openness to a person and sensitivity to culture are always required in cross-cultural mentoring relationships, there are no clear-cut guidelines to building strong cross-cultural mentoring relationships. As described in this paper, the expectations and assumptions behind mentoring in an individualistic culture and a collectivistic culture are very different and their strengths often paradoxical. The degree to which a culture is individualistic or collectivist will influence mentoring practices. Balancing the paradoxical components is an art to be mastered to bring out the best strengths of both worlds. For this reason, understanding cultural assumptions related to mentoring issues is one of the key factors in cross-cultural mentoring. If the strengths from both cultures can be exercised simultaneously, cross-cultural mentoring could surpass the contributions that mono-cultural mentoring offers.

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