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Enhancing Employee Motivation and Ethical Work Culture through Integrated Theoretical Frameworks

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Abstract. This research paper highlights how Integrating Equity theory, Path-Goal Leadership, and Deontological ethics shapes a balanced and ethical work environment, promoting motivation through fairness, goal clarity, and moral principles. These approaches enhance job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity by valuing employees and fostering intrinsic motivation. Creating a balanced, ethical work environment will increase job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity. The paper adopts a literature-based descriptive-analytical methodology, providing an overview of Equity Theory, Path-Goal Leadership, and Deontological Ethics and explaining how integrating these approaches influences employee motivation. The paper will extensively examine relevant literature on the three methods. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Leaders utilizing Path-Goal, Equity, and Deontological Ethics theories create motivated, goal-oriented teams, ensuring fairness, ethical decision-making, and a thriving, morally responsible workplace.

Keywords. equity theory, path-goal leadership, deontological ethics, motivation, employee, leadership

Introduction

Integrating Equity theory, path-goal leadership, and deontological ethics influences employee motivation by creating a balanced and ethical work environment. Ahmadpour-Samani et al. (2022) postulated, “Equity theory (ET) is an organizational theory investigating how fairly people feel they have been treated” (p. 3711). Hence, Equity theory fosters motivation by ensuring fairness in rewards and recognizing individual contributions. Path-goal leadership clarifies goals, provides support, and matches leadership styles to employee needs, enhancing motivation. Regarding Path-Goal Leadership, Jermier (1996) clarified, “It stated that leader behavior will be motivational for subordinates to the extent that it complements the work environment and supplements it with what is otherwise lacking” (p. 313). Deontological ethics emphasizes moral principles, promoting trust and respect, positively impacting employee morale. Yet, Shafer-Landau (2013) asserted that “Deontologists believe that certain actions are intrinsically morally right or wrong. That is, many actions have the moral character they do by virtue of their own nature, considered entirely apart from any good or bad consequences they generate” (p. 481). Accordingly, these approaches inspire employees by acknowledging their efforts, aligning leadership with their aspirations, and fostering an ethical workplace culture

that values intrinsic motivation and employee well-being. This integrated approach increases job satisfaction, commitment, and overall productivity.

This research paper will consider a literature-based descriptive-analytical methodology to effectively address its research problem and answer its main research question. The paper undergoes an extensive literature review on Equity theory, Path-Goal Leadership, Deontological Ethics, and their implications for employee motivation. Then, the paper will discuss such a triangular theoretical framework in influencing employee motivation. Hence, the paper will conclude that Leaders utilizing Path-Goal, Equity, and Deontological Ethics theories create motivated, goal-oriented teams, ensuring fairness, ethical decision-making, and a thriving, morally responsible workplace. Finally, the paper will provide key recommendations that outline a clear path for leaders to shape employee motivation and establish a morally sound workplace.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper explores integrating Equity theory, path-goal leadership, and deontological ethics to create a balanced, ethical work environment that enhances employee motivation. Equity theory ensures fairness in rewards, path-goal leadership aligns goals with employee needs, and deontological ethics emphasizes moral principles. Together, they inspire employees, recognize their contributions, and nurture an ethical workplace culture. The paper employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to assess the impact of this integration on employee motivation, emphasizing its role in creating motivated teams, ensuring fairness, and making ethical decisions. The objective is to understand how these frameworks enhance motivation and promote an ethical work environment. To better elaborate on the paper's theoretical framework, Figure 1 below provides an overview of the paper's logical framework.

Problem Statement

The research problem investigates the impact of integrating Equity Theory, Path-Goal leadership, and Deontological Ethics on employee motivation and creating a balanced and ethical work environment. This encompasses exploring how these approaches collectively inspire employees, acknowledge their contributions, align leadership practices with employee aspirations, and cultivate an ethical workplace culture that values intrinsic motivation and well-being.

Research Question

“How does integrating Equity theory, path-goal leadership, and deontological ethics influence employee motivation?”

This research question involves delving into how these combined strategies synergistically stimulate employees, recognize their input, synchronize leadership methodologies with employee ambitions, and nurture a workplace culture characterized by ethical values, intrinsic motivation, and well-being.

Research Objective

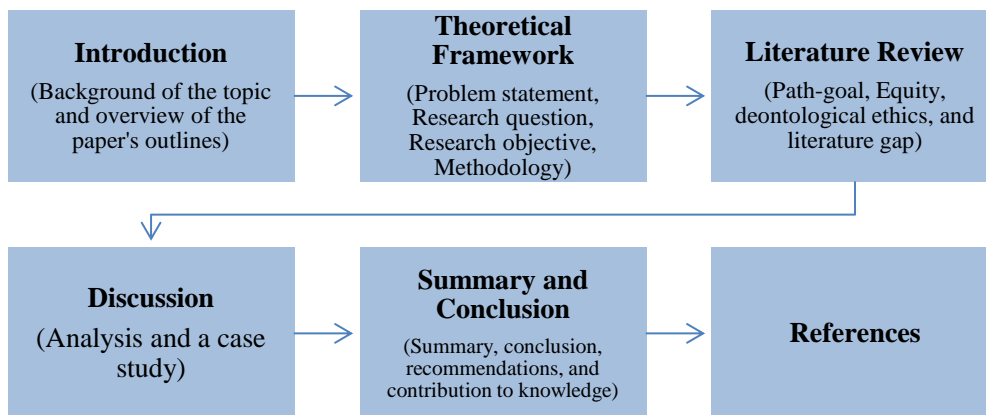
This research paper aims to understand how Equity theory, Path-Goal Leadership, and Deontological Ethics enhance employee motivation and promote a balanced and ethical work environment.

Methodology

The paper adopts a literature-based descriptive-analytical approach to tackle the research problem by answering its research question. The paper will rely on elaborative figures

and a case study to support its discussion. It reviews relevant literature, discusses the impact on employee motivation, highlights the benefits of the integrated theoretical framework, and provides certain recommendations.

Figure 1.
 Logical Flow of Information



Literature Review

The Path-Goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics offer multifaceted perspectives on leadership, organizational justice, and ethical decision-making. These frameworks enrich our understanding of leadership dynamics, ethical considerations, and their complex interplay in organizational contexts. Understanding their implications equips leaders with tools to navigate diverse situations, uphold fairness, and make morally informed choices. Hence, the following extensive literature review will provide a sound basis for integrating Equity theory, Path-Goal Leadership, and Deontological Ethics to influence employee motivation by creating a balanced and ethical work environment.

Path-Goal Theory

The Path-Goal Leadership Theory is a significant framework that centers on the leader-follower relationship to achieve organizational goals. It highlights the leader's role in clarifying paths and overcoming obstacles to help followers effectively attain their objectives. This theory is important because it enhances employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. The Path-Goal Leadership Theory offers valuable insights into the dynamic nature of leadership and stresses the importance of aligning leader behaviors with follower needs and situational factors.

For instance, in its early stages, the Path-Goal Theory investigated how a leader's task-oriented and relations-oriented behavior influenced subordinates' satisfaction and performance across different situations. Hence, it presented a more comprehensive framework as the theory evolved, showing how various leadership behaviors can impact followers' outcomes in diverse contexts (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Therefore, Yukl and Gardner (2020) postulated, "Subordinates will perform better when they have clear and accurate role expectations" (p. 187). Further, the Path-Goal Theory links leader behavior (task-oriented and relations-oriented) to subordinates' improved performance through clear expectations, effort perception, and positive outcomes. Hence, situational factors influence leader behavior's impact on satisfaction and

effort. Thus, task-oriented behavior has more impact on role clarity, self-efficacy, effort, and performance in complex tasks (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

Moreover, the Path-Goal Theory transformed leadership research by identifying unique leader behaviors and emphasizing situational factors. Also, this theory challenged traditional task and relationship-oriented approaches, introducing participative and achievement-oriented behaviors, as the theory recognized situational variables' role in moderating leader effects, making certain behaviors irrelevant (Jermier, 1996). Therefore, Jermier (1996) postulated that “this theory includes the highly interesting premise that there are situations where the behavioral roles of the formal leader are quite insignificant; its subtext aligns with the current zeitgeist of empowerment from below” (p. 316).

However, critics pointed out methodological limitations in the Path-Goal Theory, such as measurement artifacts and sampling inadequacies, highlighting inaccurate statistical models, especially regarding interactions among moderator variables, and the lack of longitudinal designs. Also, the theory's conceptual complexity presents challenges for empirical testing using positivistic field methods (Jermier, 1996). Hence, Jermier (1996) suggested that “a close reading of the Path-Goal Theory reveals a text full of follower-centered concepts and a subtext loaded with servant-type leadership rhetoric” (p. 314).

Furthermore, the complexity of the Path-Goal Theory and its numerous leadership aspects can lead to interpretational confusion, and gender differences in leadership enactment and perception are not fully addressed. Also, critiques emphasize the overreliance on leader behavior as the primary motivator and the theory's limited explanation of the leadership-follower motivation relationship (Northouse, 2019). Hence, Northouse (2019) postulated, “Path-Goal Theory presumes that leaders possess the advanced communication skills necessary to swiftly jockey between the various leadership behaviors to effectively interact with followers in all given situations” (p. 210).

Equity Theory

Another critical aspect of the organizational setup is personnel motivation, i.e., the extent to which the staff feels they are treated reasonably within the organizational setup. Equity Theory examines such an extent. Ahmadpour-Samani et al. (2022) defined Equity Theory as “an organizational theory investigating how fairly people feel they have been treated” (p. 3711). Hence, Individuals provide input to organizations and, in return, obtain results. Each person evaluates their contributions and the results they get relative to those of others, which could lead to feelings of discontent. This process serves as the basis for the equity theory. Experiencing a sense of inequality drives people to strive for fairness by attaining equity or lessening the disparity (Ahmadpour-Samani et al., 2022).

However, Ahmadpour-Samani et al. (2022) asserted that “measuring the perceived equity is essential because the more inequity people perceive, the more distress they feel, and therefore, the more efforts they make to reduce the inequity” (p. 2712). In other words, the Equity Theory neglects procedural fairness and cannot determine optimal input and outcome values. It fails to address a crucial query: How much should an underpaid person's inputs (outcomes) decrease (increase) to achieve contentment? This precise answer is vital. Hence, insufficient adjustments won't create equity, merely lessen discontent, and excessive changes could shift disadvantageous inequity from dissatisfied to content individuals (Ahmadpour-Samani et al., 2022).

Moreover, Biewendt et al. (2021) proposed, “Equity theory provides an explanation of how internal factors influence the emergence of motivation through perceptions of equality and

inequality” (p. 21). Thus, The fundamental concept of equity theory revolves around employees logically evaluating if their contributions, typically through work performance or hours worked, align suitably with the rewards they obtain, usually in the form of financial benefits like salary or bonuses (Biewendt et al., 2021). Also, Davlembayeva and Alamanos (2022) concluded that “positive behaviour of employees can be secured by subjecting employees to fair procedures irrespective of the equitable distribution of rewards compared to other employees in the organisation” (p. 5). Hence, the theory proposes five core principles. Initially, relationships are based on equity norms. Next, equity assessment stems from comparing personal inputs/outputs with those of others in social exchanges. Third, imbalanced rewards relative to contributions cause perceptions of inequity. Fourth, inequity creates psychological unease due to outcome disparities. Lastly, perceiving inequity prompts individuals to restore balance, seeking emotional relief (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2022).

Deontological Ethics

Kantian deontology, a form of deontological ethics, centers on autonomy, dignity, and individual respect. It prioritizes duty-based ethics and prohibits harm, even if positive outcomes result. Decisions might prioritize individual well-being over societal benefits. Deontology evaluates actions by their nature, not consequences. This framework underscores human values like autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (Tseng & Wang, 2021). Therefore, Tseng and Wang (2021) asserted, “Deontological ethics emphasizes the value of being a human being, underlining the principles of respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice” (p. 7).

Moreover, a philosophical standpoint states that violating perfect duties occurs by using someone solely as a means, and imperfect duties are breached by not treating them as an end, even without using them as a means. Our obligation to others is to enhance their happiness, not perfection. Yet, our duty might be to seek our joy for moral well-being. Specific actions, like repaying debts, correspond to perfect responsibilities, while the extent of helping others, guided by benevolence, is subject to our discretion (Udayakumar & Babu, 2021). Hence, Udayakumar and Babu (2021) claimed that “Actions are not judged on the basis of the results but on the basis of their conformity to the standards of duty” (p. 241).

Accordingly, cognitive motives for averting harm factor into deontological choices, revealing broader behavioral preferences over just emotional processes. Deontological decisions merge affective and cognitive facets with a more substantial emotional element. Opting for a deontological dilemma might amplify overall distress, leading individuals to favor the unchosen outcome-maximizing option. This positions deontological decision-makers as warmer, ethical, and dependable (Goldstein-Greenwood et al., 2020). Therefore, Goldstein-Greenwood et al. (2020) suggested that “deontological judgments tend to reflect a nexus of processes that is relatively more effective than cognitive” (p. 2).

Additionally, deontologists assert that specific actions possess inherent moral essence, irrespective of outcomes. Actions' nature, beyond their results, dictates their moral correctness. Intentions critically shape moral assessment; direct harm intent prohibits actions morally, while milder harm intent may render them permissible (Shafer-Landau, 2013). Thus, Shafer-Landau (2013) clarified that “our intentions matter crucially to the moral character of our actions, such that directly intending harm may render them morally forbidden, whereas a more benign intention may render them permissible” (p. 484).

Finally, the deontological perspective postulates that the focus lies on the inherently moral nature of the action rather than its favorable or unfavorable intentions. Ethical guidelines

are seen as objective and universally applicable, affecting everyone irrespective of their affiliations. When individuals view a matter as contradicting a moral rule, they show increased discomfort towards actions harming others and differing viewpoints and behaviors. They generally exhibit reduced acceptance of these, regardless of involving members from their group or other groups (Verkuyten et al., 2023).

Literature Gap

This extensive literature review explores the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics in the context of leadership, organizational justice, and ethical decision-making. While the review covers these three frameworks comprehensively, a potential literature gap requires further research to consider the potential synergies or conflicts when integrating all three into a holistic approach to leadership and organizational ethics.

Exploring this research gap has the potential to foster a more profound and better comprehension of how the interplay between the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics shapes and impacts leadership outcomes on employees' welfare and organizational environment.

Discussion

The convergence of the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics offers a comprehensive framework for understanding leadership dynamics, fostering organizational justice, and making ethically informed decisions within the organizational context. These theories collectively enrich our comprehension of the multifaceted factors influencing employee motivation and contribute to creating an ethical and balanced work environment.

Path-Goal Theory emphasizes the pivotal role of leaders in facilitating followers' journey toward achieving organizational goals. By clarifying paths and removing obstacles, leaders enhance employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. The theory underscores the importance of adapting leader behaviors to meet follower needs and situational demands. Yet, the theory adds the participative dimension to the leadership arena, as Jermier (1996) stated that "Path-goal theory specified four conceptually distinct varieties of leader behavior, denying what was taken-for-granted about the exclusiveness and primacy of task and relationship-oriented behaviors by including participative and achievement-oriented behaviors" (p. 313). This understanding equips leaders with the tools to navigate various scenarios, promoting effective interaction between leaders and followers. While the theory acknowledges its conceptual intricacies and the need for clear communication skills, it remains a cornerstone in understanding leadership dynamics.

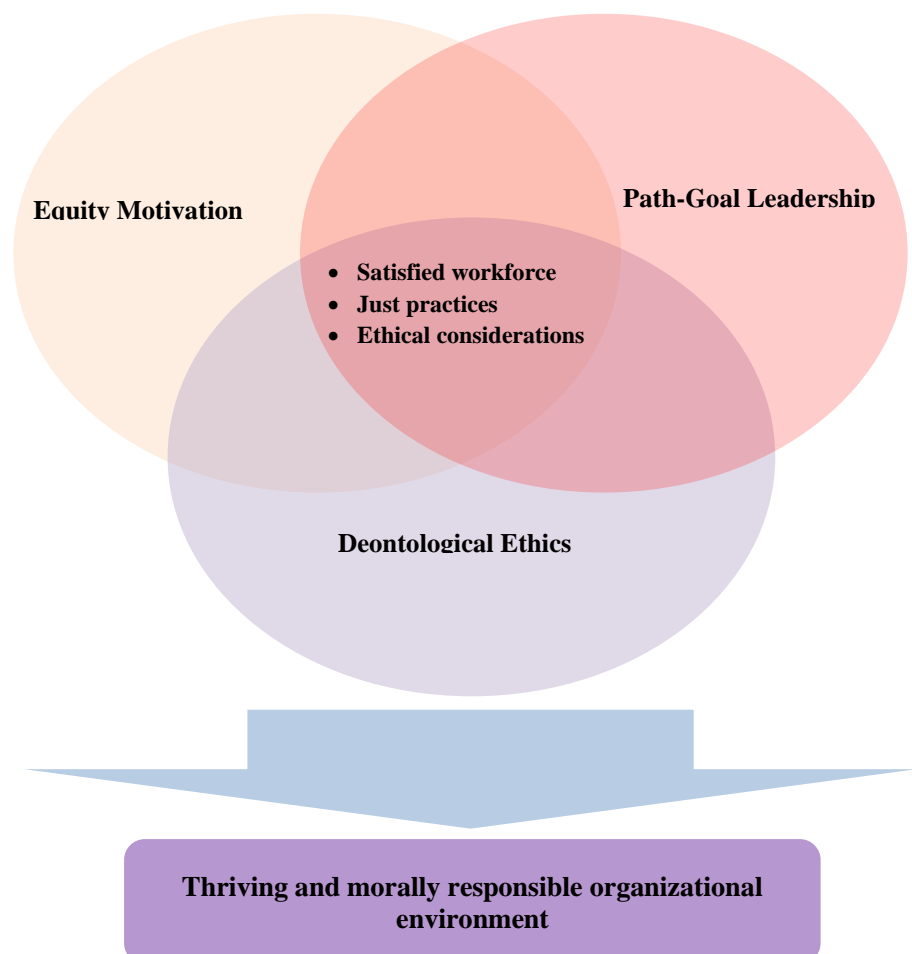
Equity Theory delves into organizational justice, mainly focusing on the fairness of treatment and its impact on employee motivation. Recognizing that perceived inequities can lead to discomfort and reduced efforts, the theory emphasizes the significance of the fair distribution of rewards and transparent procedures, as Davlembayeva & Alamanos (2022) asserted that "the theory was needed to help understand how the fairness of exchange between an employer and employee is formed and propose ways to regulate the outcome of relations" (p. 1). Hence, by identifying the core principles guiding equity assessments, leaders can enhance their understanding of creating a work environment that fosters employee motivation and contentment. The Equity Theory establishes a sense of balance and justice within the organization.

On the other hand, Deontological Ethics provides an ethical foundation for decision-making within an organizational context. It emphasizes the inherent moral quality of actions and the importance of intentions. In other words, Shafer-Landau (2013) explained, “Our intentions matter crucially to the moral character of our actions, such that directly intending harm may render them morally forbidden, whereas a more benign intention may render them permissible” (p. 484). By highlighting principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, deontological ethics offers guidance for leaders facing complex ethical dilemmas. It reinforces the notion that actions should be judged by their conformity to moral standards rather than merely considering their outcomes. This ethical framework equips leaders with the tools to make morally informed choices, even when facing difficult decisions.

Integrating these three frameworks into an organizational context offers substantial benefits. By employing the principles of the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, leaders can create a motivated and satisfied workforce aligned with organizational objectives. The Equity Theory contributes to establishing fair and just practices, enhancing employee motivation by reducing feelings of discontent arising from perceived inequalities. Deontological Ethics provides a moral compass, ensuring that decisions are rooted in ethical considerations and building trust and credibility.

Thus, these multifaceted perspectives collectively contribute to leadership effectiveness, organizational justice, and ethical decision-making. Leaders who understand and apply these theories are better equipped to navigate complexities and foster a workplace that not only thrives but also upholds ethical principles. Figure 2 below better elaborates on this integrative framework.

Figure 2.
Integrative Framework



To elaborate further on the significance of the integrated theoretical framework, the following case study will do what is needed.

Case Study. Tre, a recent college graduate, is employed in the finance and analytics division of a prominent publicly traded software corporation. Recently, Tre stumbled upon a troubling inconsistency in the sales records, sparking doubts regarding the company's dedication to providing accurate information to its investors (Garcia, 2023).

The Utilitarian ethical dilemma, in this case, centers on Tre's discovery of sales recording discrepancies in their software company. Reporting the issue may lead to investigations and stock price drops, potentially harming shareholders, employees, and customers. Remaining silent might benefit the company in the short term but harm investors relying on accurate information. Tre must balance minimizing long-term harm to stakeholders by reporting the issue and maximizing short-term benefits for the company by concealing it. The decision must prioritize overall well-being by considering the consequences for all affected parties (Garcia, 2023).

Argumentation. In this case, a servant leader would actively listen to Tre, empathizing with his concerns about the sales discrepancy and its ethical implications. Instead of prioritizing the company's immediate interests, the servant leader would provide emotional support, encourage open dialogue, and validate Tre's moral concerns. Servant leadership also emphasizes collaboration and shared decision-making, promoting cooperation with Tre to address the issue in alignment with the company's ethical values while minimizing harm to stakeholders. The servant leader may advocate for reporting the discrepancy through proper channels, stressing the importance of honesty and integrity for the company's long-term success.

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

Incorporating the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics offers a powerful toolkit for leaders to navigate the intricate landscape of organizational leadership and ethical decision-making. The Path-Goal Theory emphasizes the leader's role in guiding followers toward objectives through adaptable behaviors. Equity Theory underscores the importance of fairness and transparent procedures, enhancing employee motivation and contentment. Deontological Ethics provides a moral compass, guiding leaders to make ethically informed choices rooted in autonomy, beneficence, and justice principles.

Conclusion

By employing the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics, leaders can establish motivated teams that align with organizational goals, ensure fairness and justice in practices, and make morally sound decisions. These multifaceted perspectives enrich leadership dynamics and contribute to cultivating an ethical workplace. Ultimately, leaders who grasp and apply these theories are better equipped to navigate complexities, foster employee satisfaction, and uphold ethical principles, resulting in a thriving and morally responsible organizational environment. Thus, by incorporating the following recommendations, leaders can steer a strong basis for shaping employee motivation and establishing a morally sound workplace.

Recommendations. Firstly, the Path-Goal Leadership theory should be employed to clarify paths, remove obstacles, and adapt leadership behaviors to meet follower needs, enhancing employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. Secondly, embrace Equity Theory to ensure fairness in treatment, reward distribution, and transparent procedures,

reducing perceived inequities and fostering a sense of balance within the organization. Thirdly, this ethical framework should guide decision-making based on autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, prioritizing actions that align with ethical standards. Finally, these three frameworks within the organizational context can be combined to create a motivated workforce aligned with organizational goals, establish fair practices, and make morally informed decisions.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research paper contributes to knowledge in several ways. First, it integrates three significant theoretical frameworks—path—goal Leadership Theory, Equity Theory, and Deontological Ethics—into a holistic approach to understanding employee motivation and fostering an ethical work culture. Second, it goes beyond theory by offering recommendations for leaders to implement these frameworks effectively. It bridges the gap between theory and practice by examining the interplay among these frameworks and how they collectively impact leadership dynamics, organizational justice, and ethical decision-making.

This literature synthesis provides a valuable resource for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand the interconnectedness of these concepts. Finally, this research paper contributes to organizational behavior and management by offering an integrated perspective on leadership, motivation, fairness, and ethics. It advances theoretical knowledge and provides practical guidance for leaders creating a motivating and ethically sound work environment.

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