

Successful Executives: How Independent?

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American folklore values the notion of independence. Our heroes—like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Dwight David Eisenhower, and Lee Iacocca—are individuals who appear larger than life. Yet while they appear individualistic and independent, such people actually depend on a host of others in their public and private lives.

Consequently, they achieve success while not being torn apart by the accompanying demands and stresses. Their attachments to many people through their public and private support networks enable them to sustain success and manage heavy demands and stresses with a minimum of distress. They recognize their own limitations and form relationships that enable them to transcend those limits. Those who are not able to extend themselves in this way may suffer from problems rooted in separation anxiety that inhibit them from forming healthy attachments to other people.

In light of these observations, executives pursuing success should ask themselves two questions: (1) Is forming healthy attachments with other people an integral part of my behavior? and (2) Is separation anxiety a personal problem that poses a health risk to me? Exhibit 1 contains a set of ten questions. Take a couple of minutes to answer each question. We will come back to your answers at the end of the article and see what they suggest about you.

Exhibit 1

Forming Healthy Attachments: A Questionnaire

	Yes	No
1. Do you make a strong effort to work alone and in a solitary fashion?	_____	_____
2. Is your work the single most important aspect of your life?	_____	_____
3. Do you regularly and easily spend time with other people during the work day?	_____	_____
4. Do you have a healthy, happy home life?	_____	_____

5. Do you have one or two major nonwork interests? _____
6. Do you trust at least two other people to have your best interests at heart? _____
7. Do you think you are the only one who can do a job right? _____
8. Do you avoid depending on other people because you feel crowded by close relationships? _____
9. Can you easily ask for help when you need it? _____
10. Are you frequently suspicious of other people's motives and intentions? _____

What Is Success?

Success has no universal definition, yet it is a goal all executives are expected to pursue. Every occupation and profession has its own culturally derived criteria—often unwritten—to serve as the yardsticks of success. For many executives, money and financial wealth may be the key criteria. For others, social status may be the key criterion. For still others, it may be progress toward some ideal contained in a philosophical or religious set of beliefs. American corporate culture strictly measures success by upward mobility, defined as increasing wealth, income, and occupational stature. There are, of course, variations. For example, to the president of one of the country's ten leading real estate firms, success means satisfying the needs of each and every customer.¹

Presidents, board chairmen, and chief executive officers are leaders with strong self-images.² The self-image is the way an executive views himself at a particular time. It incorporates strengths, talents, and abilities as well as limitations and shortcomings.

One's self-image operates in conjunction with an ego ideal, which is the way an executive defines per-

sonal success. The ego ideal is a partially conscious element of the executive's psychological makeup. It is the ideal self the executive is striving to become.

There is inevitably a dynamic tension between one's self-image and one's ego ideal. This tension provides much of the impetus for an executive's efforts and striving. The tension can never be fully released for the healthy executive because the self-image and ego ideal change over time and never converge. As the gap between the self-image and ego ideal narrows—the result of the executive's successful efforts—the ego ideal is modified to serve again as a new goal and road map. The elusive ego ideal can therefore never be reached.

Healthy executives with strong, positive self-images and ego ideals allow themselves to serve as role models for developing executives. Yet they have the capacity to allow those followers freedom of action. That is, they allow a follower to behave independently so long as the follower's behavior complements and supplements their own. They punish those whose behavior directly conflicts with their ego ideal and definition of success, painful as that may be. Rather than being megalomaniacs, these healthy executives recognize their competencies and extend themselves through their followers. The ego ideal serves as the guide for this process.

An executive pursues an ego ideal through some combination of drive, ability, and support from other people. While innate drive and ability can bring an executive success, they alone may not be able to sustain him or her in the face of the demands and stresses that accompany success.

Driving Ambition

Some executives achieve success by combining their natural talents with driving ambition. But in the process they can become overextended and vulnerable by failing to develop the supportive relationships that would allow them to maintain their success. An unfortunate example of this type of executive is Alvin Feldman, president of Continental Airlines, who committed suicide in 1981. Eli Black of United Brands did likewise in 1975, and Vernon Watson of Walston & Company preceded Black in 1964. Problems and poor reactions of a less extreme nature also characterize leaders who become overextended.

A case in point is T. Woodrow Wilson. Wilson is known to have had great ambition and a warm and influential public presence, but he felt very little interest in self-examination and was not comfortable in most relationships. Wilson was also a complex, contradictory person with a narrow range of interests and a "one track" mind. His personal attributes and driving ambition helped him gain substantial success as president of Princeton and President of the United States. However, his tenure was scarred by failures.

Wilson's failures were ones of relationships, not ability or drive. In attempting to install the quad system at Princeton, he relied heavily on his own power

and judgment, failing to develop support from various constituencies and exhibiting substantial rigidity. This pattern of isolation and rigidity in a situation that called for flexibility and responsiveness was repeated during his campaign for the League of Nations at the end of his term as President in 1919. He assembled a very partisan and ineffective Peace Commission to herald his "cause" and failed to do the essential political lobbying to make the League of Nations a strong reality. It was precisely when he needed the most support that he exhibited rigidity that interfered with his development of that support. Wilson had sufficient driving ambition and ability to achieve the success he sought, but he lacked the capacity to develop supportive relationships that would have enabled him to sustain and enjoy his success.³

Consider the case of Lee Iacocca. Throughout his career Iacocca has coupled his drive and ability with the support of a variety of talented people. This was evident with the Fairlane Committee, which he assembled to develop the Mustang while he was a new vice-president at Ford. It was also evident with the management team he assembled to rebuild Chrysler. In *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, he writes:

I was the general in the war to save Chrysler. But I sure didn't do it alone. What I'm most proud of is the coalition I was able to put together. It shows what cooperation can do for you in hard times.

His natural abilities, a strong personal support network, and his diversified management team prevented him from caving in under stress and demands that would have meant failure for many other men and women.⁴

While Iacocca's experiences may be a dramatic illustration, there is little doubt that the pursuit of success involves an assortment of demands and stresses. Clearly, the notion of "stress" is often interpreted pejoratively and viewed as an experience to be avoided.⁵ This is unfortunate because stress is an inevitable consequence of the demands an executive experiences in work and at home. Some people even believe that successful individuals are not supposed to "have" stress. This creates a potentially destructive double bind for successful executives: It can encourage them to deny much of their own stress, and the denial can compound the adverse effects of stress on their health and well-being. Only when one consciously acknowledges the demands and stress he or she feels can action be taken to manage either.

Managing Stress

Some executives are more effective than others at managing stress. Consider an illustration of poor management exhibited by the president of a small, private college in the Southwest. Several years ago when the NCAA instituted its new playoff system, members of

the faculty approached him about the conflict between the playoff schedule and final exams. They pressed him to exclude the college's football team from any playoff games on the grounds that participation would conflict with the academic goals of the college. The president, a former literature professor, went along with the request immediately. He informed the trustees and alumni board of his administrative decision and released a brief press notice about it—all without consulting the athletic director, football coach, or players. Reacting to the faculty demand in a way that was compatible with his personal values but failing to consult all affected constituencies, he overlooked the relatedness of all organizational life.

Quite understandably, the athletic director, coach, and players were upset, particularly in light of commitments the coach had made to his players during recruitment. In addition, certain alumni factions were very upset. After much internal conflict at the university, the president reversed his original, hard-line decision and arrived at a patchwork solution: The team would play during the first three playoff seasons—after which all current students would have graduated—and then the college would drop out. This solution did not fully satisfy the coach, faculty, or alumni. Groups of alumni continued writing angry and provocative letters for nearly a year to the president and the alumni newspaper. Several players and the coach had bad feelings for more than a year.

Much of this stress could have been averted had the president originally taken broader initiative. His *reactive* action in the face of the faculty demand illustrates that problems can arise when an executive in a stressful situation does not collaborate with all affected constituencies in formulating an appropriate and effective response to a demand.

The president and chief executive officer of a leading international oil-field service corporation responded much differently to a very stressful situation. From 1978 through early 1982, his company experienced remarkable growth and expansion. The corporation doubled its dollar volume revenue, becoming a half-billion-dollar corporation, and expanded to 9,000 employees worldwide. Capital budgets of \$150 million to \$200 million were set. However, after the second quarter of 1982 the dramatic downturn in the industry occurred, and by 1984 the company had returned to its 1978 level of activity. This meant the company had to reduce the workforce to roughly 5,000 while slashing capital budgets to the \$40 million to \$50 million range.

Both the growth years and the contraction years were stressful for the CEO and company, but the CEO's response to these dramatic changes was neither reactive nor panicky. In an effort to meet the needs of all constituencies—including shareholders, employees, suppliers, and customers—he formulated a response that took two forms, one active and one passive. On the one hand, he acted in a slow, deliberate, and methodical manner to gather information and make critical decisions. He describes his behavior very aptly: "Don't overreact to first reports of serious problems. Be pa-

tient. Seek additional information from other sources before arriving at a full appraisal of the situation." Through direct action and decision making, he maintained an active dialogue with all affected constituencies. He never withdrew to make solitary decisions but also was never hesitant to act decisively when the situation dictated such an action.

On the other hand, this CEO was quite capable of seeing the limits of his ability to act and was able to respond passively—which meant neither hopelessly nor helplessly—when it was appropriate. For example, he often trusted his subordinates to act effectively on his behalf in dealing with the company's problems. Their abilities, talents, and knowledge complemented his own.

A Leap of Faith

The oil company's CEO was capable of a leap of faith in responding to stressful situations. It is essential for any executive to take such a leap of faith at times because it is not possible for an executive to deal personally with all his or her work demands. Harold Geneen, Chairman of the Board at ITT, has been quoted as saying, "If I had enough arms and legs and time, I would do it all myself." ⁶ But every executive has limits. Reaching one's limits often results in uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. An executive in this position can frantically lash out at the limitation and struggle to overcome it alone, or can take a leap of faith and trust others to do what he or she cannot because of time, ability, knowledge, or skill limitations. A reasoned leap of faith, however, involves careful personnel selection, delegation, and honest communication.

Personnel Selection

Successful executives do not select key managers at random; they develop mechanisms for careful, systematic personnel selection. While this does not eliminate the risks that depending on another person entails, it does define and minimize those risks. In building his management team at Chrysler, Iacocca carefully reviewed his personal "black books" developed over the years at Ford, which contained detailed information about the careers of hundreds of Ford executives and managers. After a systematic review of his needs at Chrysler and the special talents of various executives in his books, he chose executives who had particular strengths and competencies that would supplement and complement his own. The president of one of the largest health-care operating companies in the world selects his subordinates in a similar fashion. He chooses men and women he believes are *more* capable than he is—that is, men and women with talents, skills, or knowledge he doesn't possess. By doing so, he builds a team of executives who are most able to help him achieve his objectives. His own self-confidence ensures

that he will not be threatened or frightened by the competence and ability of others. A less secure executive would be too threatened to select the best people.

A naval flag rank officer stationed at the glass house in Washington, DC echoes the importance of a talented, capable support staff: "Surround yourself with very competent, capable people . . . Make sure that they are the best performers that you can get. . . that they are the best qualified and the best experienced." 7

The president of the real estate firm mentioned earlier identifies effective personnel selection and training as key factors that keep her firm among the country's top ten residential real estate companies. By selecting agents who are best equipped in drive and interpersonal skills to render excellent service, she assures that customer needs are met. Selection of support staff is also critical, and is undertaken with great care. Her capable, motivated staff have helped her identify industry trends over the past 25 years, which has enabled the firm to stay on the leading edge. In fact, her firm was one of the first, if not the first, to offer corporate relocation services 20 years ago.

Personnel selection is important not only in building a permanent staff, but also in solving particularly difficult or complex problems. While the oil company CEO relied heavily on his subordinates and his board of directors, he also was not hesitant to solicit the specialized knowledge of outside experts to reduce his oil-field service operations. He depended on an assortment of individuals in dealing with his company's difficult problems, yet he took full responsibility for organizing and integrating their efforts and contributions.

Delegation Involves Faith

Unless a chief executive is able to depend on and have faith in the managers recruited, he or she will never delegate work effectively. And the interdependence required in corporate life makes delegation an absolute necessity. As the health-care executive says, "In a large corporation I really think you can't operate by yourself." Once this executive has selected people with particular expertise, he then turns them loose to work quite independently. His organization is very decentralized, and he strongly resists establishing many controls, believing that such centralization inhibits the natural ability of good executives and managers.

The oil company CEO operates in a very similar fashion. He considers it essential to get out of the way of his subordinates once he has given them an assignment, reasoning that involvement would be seen as interference. He is not disinterested in his subordinates' work—he makes himself available to deal with problems and questions—but his primary initiative is to delegate the assignment. After that he is primarily a respondent to his personnel as they resolve problems to complete the assignment.

Effective delegation is particularly difficult for an executive who has not established a secure, distinct

identity because he or she is not able to trust other people. An executive who has a distinct identity does not depend on other individuals to provide him or her with identity and definition. Such executives know how to rely on themselves *and others*, which is an essential prerequisite to effective delegation.

Honest Communication

The leap of faith executives take in depending on others involves honest communication. The oil company CEO says he places a particularly high value on honest communication and exhibits little tolerance for a lack of honesty or integrity in work relations. In his words, "Speak and act honestly at all times . . . (This does not eliminate the need for diplomacy, tact, and silence at times)." Without fundamental, honest communication, it is difficult to get a firm grasp on problems, dilemmas, and circumstances. The lack of honest communication increases uncertainty and confusion in the work environment, especially for the chief executive.

An important feature of honest communication is the ability to listen to the truth, as told by various constituencies. The health-care executive spends a great deal of time in direct communication with a wide variety of people. He estimates that he spends as much as 70% of his time listening to subordinates, colleagues, and other constituencies. He allows the speaker full expression in order to obtain a clear, accurate sense of the individual's circumstances and/or problems. If his subordinates have problems, he helps them resolve them or obtain resources, expertise, or personnel who can help.

Is Work Their Life?

There are executives whose self-concepts are based on their work. Their identity seems directly related to work. Certainly the very stressful circumstances faced by Lee Iacocca and the oil company president led to periods in which work was an all-consuming emotional drain. For the successful executive who is effective in managing the stress a job entails, however, work will not be the basis of his or her identity—at least not the primary one. The successful executive does not require other people, objects, or activities to give him or her a sense of identity; instead, an identity emerges from within that person. The successful executive does, however, acknowledge his or her dependence on others in successfully executing a job.

The oil company executive is a good illustration here. He communicates with his behavior and deportment a personal sense of security. And while his work is important to him, it is not overly important. He says, "I can truthfully look you in the eye and say that my work is not the most important thing in my life. It is very important, but it's not the most important thing. To me, my family, my friends, my church, my personal enjoyment of life are actually more important to me than my job." These other aspects give this executive's

life balance and wholeness, which is a great source of strength, particularly in stressful times. His personal life complements and strengthens his professional life.

The experience of the health-care professional is quite similar. His religious faith and his family are very important aspects of his life. His work is very important, but it is not *the* the most important thing. "To me, my religious faith has always been, for as long as I can remember, the motivating factor in my life," he says. "And it has always given me a great sense of comfort. I know, for instance, if I fail at anything I am doing, I'm going to succeed in the *most important part of my life.*"

These successful executives are not independent in the traditional sense of the word, but are self-sufficient because they have their own distinct identity. How does this distinct identity develop? How do they deal with the psychological issues of dependence and independence? How are they able to act both independently and dependently at the same time? How are they both separated from the world and yet an integral, involved part of it?

Attachment, Separation Anxiety, and Self-Reliance

Attachment

Much of the stress of life grows out of one's feelings of separateness from the world. One of the most natural ways of combating the stress of separateness is through attachment behavior.⁸ This pattern of behavior is first exhibited when a child psychologically and physically bonds with the mother, but it becomes generalized to include other people during adolescence and adulthood. One forms a natural, healthy attachment with another person not necessarily when he or she is physically present, but when one has psychological access to that person. Most adults establish comfortable operating rules that ensure access to key people in their lives. The healthiest attachments are ones that have reciprocity and balance. People with whom one forms healthy attachments offer protection from stress by providing information, emotional comfort, feedback and suggestions, and/or defense against the demand or person causing the stress.

Separation Anxiety

The absence or inaccessibility of key attachment figures early in life causes intense anxiety and distress.⁹ If this experience occurs frequently and intensely enough, a person's natural ability to seek and form relationships may not develop completely. The result is fear and separation anxiety, which causes people to withdraw prematurely from significant relationships in time of stress or need. People who suffer from separation anxiety problems frequently become angry in re-

sponse to their own pain over unsatisfied emotional needs. Were it not for the separation anxiety problem, they would be able to form the necessary attachments to meet these emotional needs.

An illustration of an executive who suffers substantial problems with separation anxiety is the chairman of a large commercial bank. He has a very authoritarian and highly directive management style in all of his working relationships, often instructing subordinates with a shaking, pointed index finger and an angry voice. He goes to unusual lengths to avoid depending on others, maintaining a withdrawn and aloof posture with managers and staff in the bank. In addition to typing all of his own memos and failing to confide in either staff or colleagues, he periodically causes conflict by involving himself in details rather than leaving them to others. For example, the chairman frequently interferes with his loan department by directing that certain pet loans be made while others be turned down. His decisions in these cases are not based on the bank's guidelines, but on individual whims and personal preferences that are never clear to his loan officers. His behavior communicates a lack of trust in his loan officers and creates an uncertain and unpredictable atmosphere for them. This chairman exhibits overly individualistic behavior, which signals that he has not achieved a satisfactory ability to form necessary attachments with other people.

Self-Reliance

The John Wayne myth in our culture, which extols the rugged individualist, has some serious limitations that can pose a health risk for the executive who subscribes to it. What is important to note here is the critical difference between independence, as it is often defined, and self-reliance.¹⁰ The self-reliant executive is able to (1) rely comfortably on other people when the demands of the situation warrant such reliance and (2) identify the demands and circumstances that make such reliance appropriate. In general, it is most appropriate for an executive to rely on others when his or her own limitations—of time, energy, ability, or knowledge—are reached.

The healthy self-reliant person is also able to reciprocate by being a source of security and strength for others. Thus, as situations and circumstances change, the healthy executive is able to exhibit role reversals, alternately being a source of strength and turning to others for strength. Self-reliance is an important form of responsible behavior. Specifically, it means accepting responsibility for oneself. This involves knowing that one can in fact rely on others or, in other words, having confidence that an attachment figure will be available in time of need. This knowledge and confidence evolve slowly during the early years as the personality develops. People with separation anxiety problems have not developed this self-reliance and self-confidence. This does not mean they cannot develop it; in fact, they *can* develop it.

What to Look For

Executives who are not successfully self-reliant and who experience separation anxiety problems will *not necessarily* have problems with stress. They are, however, at risk because of their difficulty in responding to their need for other people when their own limits are tested. Executives can benefit by observing those who work for them to identify individuals who might have problems coping with stressful situations. They also should examine themselves.

Turn back to your answers to the questions in Exhibit 1. A "No" for Questions 1, 2, 7, 8, and 10 and a "Yes" for Questions 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 suggest that you are a successfully self-reliant person. If your answers are the reverse, you may need to learn how to become more self-reliant. Observing those with whom you work and listening to their dialogue will give you clues as to how they might answer these questions and how successful they are in achieving self-reliance.

Observing Other Executives

As a senior executive, you may be concerned about whether your subordinates have problems with separation anxiety and self-reliant behavior. If your subordinates are not self-reliant, you should be aware that they may not respond well in stressful situations and may have difficulty asking for help in such situations. They may be more vulnerable to break down under severe or prolonged stress. Such was the case for Alvin Feldman. During his presidency, Continental Airlines faced a long strike by flight attendants, a hijack incident, and a rough takeover campaign by a competitor. One of Feldman's colleagues remarked that Feldman felt alone with the responsibility and carried this singular responsibility too far. The demands of the industry and his own difficulties in responding or seeking support no doubt contributed to his suicide.

Executives who lack balanced and diversified interpersonal relationships are potential time bombs that need careful attention. They should not be given excessive responsibilities, nor should they be exposed to highly stressful situations. Encouraging those managers to cultivate relationships of various sorts and helping them resolve internal obstacles to this effort will be invaluable to them in their career and life. In addition to putting themselves at risk, these executives create stress and strain for those around them. They react to internal needs and feelings triggered by a particular stressor or demand instead of formulating constructive courses of action with clearly identified consequences and outcomes. They do not recognize the truth about themselves—their limitations, strengths, and needs.

Observing Oneself

If an executive is not self-reliant, he or she cannot become self-reliant alone. Because attachment and separation are interpersonal issues, interpersonal work is

needed to achieve healthy self-reliance. A strong, supportive father figure or mentor in the work environment or a competent counselor may help an executive become self-reliant. The task involves confronting old conflicts and at the same time developing new skills.

It is a difficult task because an executive who has separation anxiety problems will have a reflex action that will encourage him or her to avoid close personal and professional working relationships. Keep in mind that this may be a faulty reflex action. It can become a particular problem when an executive assumes a new position or relocates to a new living environment, situations in which it is important to cultivate the various relationships essential to meeting new demands, challenges, and stresses. Without a conscious effort to cultivate such relationships, the executive with an unresolved separation anxiety problem may slide into a need deficit from which it is sometimes difficult to recover.

Successfully self-reliant executives *do not* face fewer demands in life than do executives who are less self-reliant. In fact, they may even accept *more* demands and challenges. But they are able to manage the demands and stresses they do experience more effectively because they understand their own limits and the professional and personal networks essential to complement and supplement their natural abilities. In this way they are able to sustain the success they pursue and achieve. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. With the exception of named individuals, such as Lee Iacocca, each case example was developed by the authors through direct personal observation, interviews with executives, and interviews with the case subject himself or herself. These case examples include a real estate executive, a college president, an oil company CEO, a president of a health-care organization, a naval officer, and a bank chairman. When not referring to a specific person, *he* and *his* is used for convenience and should be interpreted as *he* or *she* and *his* and *her*.

2. For an excellent discussion of this point, which is supported by six idiographic studies of chief executive officers from American corporations, see Harry Levinson and Stuart Rosenthal's *CEO: Corporate Leadership in Action*, New York: Basic Books, 1984. The following discussion draws importantly on this work.

3. The case material concerning T. Woodrow Wilson is based largely, though not exclusively, on John M. Cooper's *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983, and Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George's *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study*, New York: The John Day Co., 1956.

4. *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984 is a very interesting account, especially concerning the Fairlane Committee (pgs. 63-68) and his rebuilding of the New Chrysler Corporation (pgs. 167-181). The quote appears on page 229.

5. For a more detailed treatment of organizational stress and a review of the medical, psychological, and management literature on the topic, see James C. Quick and Jonathan D. Quick's *Organizational Stress and Preventive Management*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984. Chapter 7 presents the public health case for preventive stress management.

6. This quote appears on page 13 of Steven A. Allen's Harvard Business School case (9-472-007/Rev. 10/80) entitled *International Telephone and Telegraph Corp. (A)*.

7. This and subsequent quotations come from taped interviews conducted by the authors. For purposes of confidentiality, individuals are not identified beyond industry and position.

8. For a complete, detailed discussion of the theory and functions of attachment behavior, see John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss/Vol. I: Attachment*, Second Edition, New York: Basic Books, 1982.

9. Bowlby's extensive research extends to an understanding of separation anxiety and its accompanying distress. For a thorough discussion of these issues and a discussion of the issue of security, see his book *Attachment and Loss/Vol. II: Separation, Anxiety, and Anger*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

10. "Paradoxically, the truly self-reliant person when viewed in this light proves to be by no means as independent as cultural stereotypes suppose." (Bowlby, 1973, p. 359) This is the paradox to which we referred at the beginning of the article.

The research for this article was supported with grants from the Organized Research Fund, the University of Texas at Arlington and the Dennis Barger Foundation.

The authors would like to thank Michael Hitt, Jerry B. Harvey, James E. Dalton, Jr., Ronald O'Connor, John Trapani, and Wayne Bodensteiner for their constructive comments on early drafts of this manuscript. We would like to thank Michele Bock and Eileen Garland for their careful preparation of the manuscript as well as Sheri Schember Quick and Kathryn Dunton for assistance with final details.

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