It’s Your Ship

Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

For an organization to be successful, everyone who works for the organization, from the CEO down the ranks, has to feel that it is their company. It’s Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy” — describes the 20 months Captain D. Michael Abrashoff spent in command of the U.S. Navy guided missile destroyer USS Benfold. The author uses his experiences from commanding the Benfold to formulate lessons for management leaders in general, with the bottom line being that people are the core resource.

Technologically, the Benfold was the same ship before and after Abrashoff took over. However, he recognized the need to give his sailors a stake in the ship’s effectiveness. This “ownership” improved the sailors’ performance and made the ship far more effective, as well as a model for the rest of the Navy. Abrashoff recounts how he taught his crew to “listen aggressively” — not just hearing what someone has to say, but listening and understanding the situation clearly — as well as the importance of building up the people under your command or management.

Using an array of forward-thinking techniques that were often contrary to traditional Navy practices, Abrashoff turned his ship’s dysfunctional crew into confident and inspired problem-solvers eager to take on initiatives. Within months of Abrashoff’s coming aboard, the slogan on Benfold had become “It’s your ship.” Over time, the destroyer became known as one of the best examples of a Navy sea command, setting precedent and raising the bar in many areas.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

• How to take command, as well as lead by example — don’t just say, do it.
• The importance of communicating purpose and meaning.
• When to go beyond standard procedure — the traditional approach may work, but something new may work better.
• How to generate unity — it’s not just your ship, it’s our ship.
Opportunity in a Troubled Industry

In 1997, when it received a new commanding officer, the USS Benfold was a state-of-the-art, 8,600-ton guided-missile destroyer. To be given this spectacular vessel as his first sea command was thrilling to Captain D. Michael Abrashoff, yet there were serious challenges as well. The ship had the Navy’s most advanced arsenal of computerized missiles, a radar system that could track bird-sized objects 50 miles away and four gas turbine engines that could power the ship into combat at 30 knots — more than 33 miles per hour. However, while its systems and technologies were cutting-edge, many of the ship’s practices and protocols were outdated and inefficient — some were even detrimental. The Navy, like the rest of the American military, had spent a lot of time and money preparing for tomorrow’s battles with antiquated methods, and this lag was creating substantial challenges. To make matters worse, the Navy was in the midst of a personnel crisis. Morale among the sailors was low, resulting in a dismal retention rate. In the military, people literally provide the fighting edge, and the Navy was losing its own.

Fighting a Losing Battle

The statistics were startling. Prior to 1997, nearly 35 percent — or almost 70,000 — of the 200,000 people who joined the military annually wouldn’t complete their enlistment contracts. Of those who completed their first hitch, a very small percentage re-enlisted — not nearly enough to keep senior billets filled. Worse yet, the best talents were often the first to leave. Since it took $35,000 to recruit a trainee, and tens of thousands more in additional training costs to get new personnel to the basic level of proficiency, the price of this attrition to the taxpayer was staggering. That was only the beginning, since the dropouts went home discouraged, making it even harder to convince others to join.

The government was certainly not getting its money’s worth, but neither was it providing life-forming experiences that would shape the character of those in the military and enable them to continue to contribute once they returned to civilian life. Despite technological and military potency, the Benfold was not prepared for its primary role: combat. With a sullen crew that resented being there and could not wait to get out of the Navy, the ship was, in effect, dysfunctional.

Over the course of two years, Abrashoff improved the situation aboard ship by pursuing progressive alternatives to traditional Navy management and leadership methods. In order to make his warship more effective, Abrashoff focused on challenging, and getting the most from, his people. The captain sought, and usually found, ways to make his crew grow, to make them feel part of a unified crew, and to feel that they could make an individual contribution to benefit the whole. Leaders have to realize that change, if handled properly, is possible, starting with their piece of the world. 

Take Command

After formally assuming command of the Benfold, Abrashoff remembered flushing with embarrassment at how some of the ship’s crew did not give his predecessor a respectful send-off. His first thought was about himself. How could he ensure that his eventual departure wouldn’t be met with relief when he left the ship in two years? He knew he was taking over a very tough
crew who hadn’t exactly adored their previous captain.

Abrashoff knew he would have to come up with a new leadership model. Considering his role as leader in the context of his new post, the captain decided to first fix the people-problem on his ship. He read exit surveys conducted by the military to find out why people were leaving. He assumed that low pay would be the first reason, but in fact it was the fifth. The top reason was not being treated with respect or dignity; second was being prevented from making an impact on the organization; third was not being listened to; and fourth was not being rewarded with more responsibility.

In 1997, the Navy had a horrible retention rate. Less than half of all sailors re-enlisted for a second tour of duty; the fact that they could retire with generous benefits after only 20 years of service tempted very few. The Benfold’s retention rate was even below the average — a dismal 28 percent. In short, the ship was souring nearly three out of four of its youngest sailors, the people the Navy needs the most if it is going to develop a critical mass of reliable petty officers (the Navy’s enlisted ranks) and long-term specialists.

A New Approach

Abrashoff realized that no one, including the man or woman at the top, is capable of making every decision. As the Benfold’s new leader, Abrashoff would have to train people to think and make judgments on their own. Empowering means defining the limits in which people are allowed to operate and then setting them free.

Abrashoff began by first assuming that there is always a better way to do things and, contrary to tradition, the crew’s insights might be more profound than even the captain’s. Several months were spent analyzing every process on the ship, and each crew member was asked if there was a better way to do his or her job. Time after time, the answer was yes, and many of the answers were revelations.

A second assumption Abrashoff acted upon was that the secret to lasting change is to implement processes that people will enjoy carrying out. Focus leadership efforts on encouraging people not only to find better ways to do their jobs, but also to have fun as they do them.

Little gestures go a long way. At the San Diego Navy base, for example, Abrashoff decided to stop feeding the crew official Navy rations and instead to use the ship’s food budget to buy quality civilian brands that were cheaper and tastier. Some cooks were sent to culinary school, and what they learned turned the Benfold into a lunchtime mecca for sailors from all over the San Diego base.

Similarly, a resourceful sailor created outdoor entertainment by projecting music videos on one of the ship’s vertical surfaces for crews to enjoy as they refueled. The shows generated a lot of buzz throughout the fleet and lightened up a tedious and sometimes dangerous job.

How did the new approach affect the Benfold’s retention rate? For the two most critical categories, it jumped from 28 percent to 100 percent and stayed there. All of Benfold’s career sailors re-enlisted for an additional tour. Replacing them would cost about $100,000 per new recruit for training, but the considerable dollar savings are only the beginning. The ultimate benefit, retaining highly skilled employees, is incalculable.

Functional Innovations

The innovations on the Benfold were not all light-hearted. On the way to the Persian Gulf in 1997, the Benfold was one of three ships sailing together and scheduled to stop in Honolulu, Hawaii. The ships were involved in an exercise with an American submarine posing as the enemy. The submarine’s task was to sink
the ship carrying the commodore, the commander of
the three-ship force. While awaiting official plans for the
exercise, the captain asked his junior sonar operators, the
people who watch for enemy submarines on electronic
equipment, to create their own plans. They were told to
put themselves in the mind of the submarine comman-
der, determine his likely plans and come up with ways
to stop them.

To everyone’s surprise — including Abrashoff’s —
they devised the most imaginative plan he had ever seen.
Abrashoff submitted it, but both the commodore and
the captain of the sister ship in charge of the exercise
shot it down in favor of a last-minute plan based on the
same tactics the Navy has been using since World War
II. Now more than ever, the Navy and the U.S.
military overall needed to stop preparing for past battles and start
preparing for new ones.

When he heard the decision, Abrashoff argued with
them on the ship-to-ship radio. The radio is a secure
circuit, but also a party line that any sailor can listen to
by punching the right button, which all his sailors did.
They heard the captain challenge his bosses to try some-
thing new and bold. Unfortunately, tradition, plus out-
moded business practices, carried the day.

As a result, the submarine “sank” all three of the ships.
Talk about dejection. But the captain’s sailors knew that
Abrashoff had gone to bat for them. He could not do
less; the sailors’ innovative solution was well-deserving
of their captain’s allegiance.

### Lead by Example

While the image of a Navy captain conjures up gold
braid and firmly barked orders, neither of those things
makes a leader. A leader will never accomplish what he
or she wants by ordering it done. Real leadership must
be done by example, not precept.

Whether you like it or not, your people follow your
example. They look to you for signals, and you have
enormous influence over them. If they see you fail to
implement a policy you disagree with, they may think
they have a green light to do the same.

If they see you not telling the truth, they may feel free
to lie as well. Likewise, if they see you challenge outdat-
ed business practices, they will follow suit. Doing so will
become ingrained in the culture. Whenever an officer
proposed a plan, Abrashoff asked, “Why do we have to
do it that way? Is there a better way?” So they always
searched for better ways before coming to him. You
train your crew how to operate through every decision
you make and every action you take.

### Never Forget Your Effect on People

Leaders need to understand how directly they set the
Leaders need to understand how directly they set the
tone and spirit of everyone around them. Mediocre
leaders often don’t take the time or trouble to know
their people.

Abrashoff learned of an incident between his predeces-
sor on the Benfold and a sailor. It was near the end of the
previous captain’s tour when he stopped the sailor in the
passageway and asked if he was new to the ship. The
sailor had been one of the first to report to the Benfold as
the ship was being built and had served two years under
that captain. But he answered, with a straight face,
“Why, yes sir, I am. And what is it that you do aboard
the ship?” The captain then fingered his gold command-
at-sea pin and said, “Do you see this pin? This means
I’m the commanding officer of this ship.” The veteran
sailor responded that it was a pleasure to meet him. A
couple of sailors who witnessed this exchange enjoyed a
good, long laugh.

As a manager, the one signal you need to steadily send
to your people is how important they are to you. In fact,
nothing is more important to you. Realize your influ-
ence and use it wisely. Be there for your people. Find
out who they are, literally. Recognize the effects you
have on them and how you can make them grow.

### Listen Aggressively

It didn’t take long for Abrashoff to realize that his
young crew was smart, talented and full of good ideas
that frequently came to nothing because no one in
charge had ever listened to them. Like most organiza-
tions, the Navy seemed to put managers in a transmit-
ing mode, which minimized their receptivity. They
were conditioned to promulgate orders from above, not
to welcome suggestions from below.

Abrashoff decided that his job was to listen aggressive-
ly and to pick up every good idea the crew had for
improving the ship’s operation. Some traditionalists
might consider this heresy, but it’s just common sense.
After all, the people who do the nuts-and-bolts work on
a ship constantly see things that officers don’t. It seemed
to him only prudent for the captain to work hard at see-
ing the ship through the crew’s eyes.

This resulted in finding a simple way to limit the fre-
quency with which the ship had to be painted. One
sailor suggested changing the ferrous-metal bolts, which
rusted and streaked the sides of the ship, with stainless
steel bolts, which did neither. Because the Navy did not
Communicate Purpose and Meaning

The whole secret of leading a ship or managing a company is to articulate a common goal that inspires a diverse group of people to work hard together. That’s what Abrashoff’s sailors got: a purpose that transformed their lives and made the Benfold a composite of an elite school, a lively church, a winning football team and — best of all — the hottest go-to ship in the U.S. Navy.

When Abrashoff took command, he kept walking around the ship trying to understand why everything seemed so desperately wrong, why there was no energy anywhere. It finally hit him that people were just signing up to collect a paycheck every two weeks. They were locking their passion and enthusiasm inside their cars in the parking lot and just bringing their bodies to work.

No one had ever thought to give them a compelling vision of their work, a good reason to believe it was important. So Abrashoff came up with a vision they could believe in and began making improvements. Slowly the sailors stopped leaving their enthusiasm in their cars and began bringing it to work.

Abrashoff appreciated communication from top management. He believed in the practice of telling everyone personally what’s in store for him or her and explaining why changes are made. People can absorb anything if they are not deceived or treated arrogantly.

Some people feel that by keeping people in the dark, they maintain a measure of control. But that is a leader’s folly and an organization’s failure. Secrecy spawns isolation, not success. Abrashoff found that the more people knew what the goals were, the better buy-in he got — and better results were achieved.

Open Clogged Channels

Communicating includes management not only keeping “the ranks” informed, but also openly receiving information from below. Building up the passion and confidence of subordinates includes seeking out and taking good ideas. One dramatic example on the Benfold occurred in 1997. The Navy was having major technical problems with communications. Messages were secure, but they just did not get through to the intended parties. Some messages took five to six days to get to captains — an eternity in a military situation where seconds could count.

A Benfold radioman on the front line of ship communications spent hours reading technical manuals on a new satellite system the ship had received. The radioman told the captain he could unclog the backlog in Persian Gulf communications. The captain knew the three-star admiral in charge of naval forces in the Gulf should know this, but thought it wise to go through the necessary channels. First, he went to the communications chief of staff for the two-star admiral in charge of the Benfold’s battle group. The chief of staff vetoed the idea on the ground that it would divert manpower and use the system for a purpose not intended.

Six weeks later, with a worsening communications situation, Abrashoff decided to bypass the chief of staff and go straight to the two-star admiral. The admiral liked the idea and ordered its implementation. The radioman was flown to other ships to train them on how to use the new system. The new system worked and cleared up the communications problem. After he left the Benfold, the radioman was sent to help upgrade White House communications.

Look for Results, Not Salutes

Like military services around the globe, the U.S. Navy is a hierarchy. Rank, seniority and military discipline govern nearly everything. “Officer Country” signs ban enlisted people from parts of nearly every ship.

As gently as possible, Abrashoff set out to chip away at this rigid system. Formal etiquette is never out of style in the Navy, nor was it on his ship. When the captain walked on deck, sailors cleared gangways, threw salutes and stood at attention. They were honoring the office, as sailors must. But in a short time they learned that Abrashoff was not interested in flattery or fluff. Rigidity gets in the way of creativity. Instead of salutes, the captain wanted results, which meant achieving combat readiness.

As captain, Abrashoff was charged with enforcing 225 years of accumulated Navy regulations, policies and procedures. But every last one of those rules was up for negotiation whenever his people came up with a better way of doing things.

Go Beyond Standard Procedure

In the Navy, as in business, SOP — Standard
Operating Procedure — tends to rule. You will seldom get in trouble for following standard operating procedure. On the other hand, you will rarely get outstanding results.

Innovation and progress are achieved only by those who venture beyond standard operating procedure. You have to think imaginatively, but realistically, about what may lie ahead and prepare to meet it. You have to look for new ways to handle old tasks and fresh approaches to new problems.

Don’t Work Harder — Work Smarter

Abrashoff applied this principle to attack an epidemic of mechanical failures that was sweeping all the Arleigh Burke-class destroyers in the Atlantic and Pacific fleets. These ships, including the Benfold, have an enormous demand for electricity, which they get from gas turbine generators. The ship can run on two of them, with a third on board for emergencies. The generators’ critical cooling mechanism is a heat exchanger that runs seawater through metal tubes in the lubricating oil reservoir. The generators cost upward of $1.5 million each, but some designer had decided to save money by using cheap metal for the reservoir tubes. The tubes cost about $7,000. The upshot was that the tubes corroded, the pipes cracked, seawater contaminated the oil and the motors broke down.

When the Benfold lost two generators in a short period of time and had to limp back to port, Abrashoff started digging and learned that there had been around 60 similar failures. He wrote a message to the three-star admiral in San Diego blasting the design.

Abrashoff’s message informed the admiral that not only had the poor design cost the Navy $60 million in lost generators, but that they could not be replaced fast enough, so the Navy was losing combat capability.

An obvious solution was to replace the tubes with a tougher alloy, such as Monel. But the way the Navy worked, Abrashoff knew it would take a year of studies before anything was approved. Abrashoff’s ship was down to one generator; the captain needed a fix now and took matters into his own hands.

One of the Benfold’s broken lube-oil coolers was taken to a local engineering shop where Monel tubes were installed. It was tested and it worked, so Abrashoff had the other one fixed; those heat exchangers are working to this day.

According to Abrashoff, when you see a bad trend developing, yell and holler until people pay attention to it. By flagging the breakdowns, Abrashoff allowed the admiral to push the Navy to focus on the broader problem, while, simultaneously, the captain saw through a more immediate initiative. None of this happened simply by following standard procedure.

Build Up Your People

Once a year, all Navy ships undergo a thorough assessment in which outside inspectors validate the ship’s readiness. The ship as a whole, and the crew’s abilities and proficiencies, are rated in 24 categories, on a scale ranging from basic Level One to advanced Level Four.

The purpose is to determine how much additional training the crew needs to be ready for combat. But regardless of its readiness rating, every ship spends the next six months training at sea. Thus, there was no incentive to reach Level Four, and in fact, no ship ever did. Level One was the required minimum and that was usually considered good enough. Then, the Benfold came along.

Originally, the goal was for the Benfold to reach an overall rating of Level Two. But because of the enormous potential of the crew, it was raised to Level Three. The first challenge was finding enough senior people to supervise the 24 areas of testing. The combat systems officer told Abrashoff they only had 20 qualified people who were not involved in other critical operations.

Thinking fast, the captain responded, “Fine — pick supervisors from the next group down. You don’t always need a senior person in charge.”

“That’s never been done before,” the officer said.

The captain then responded, “See what they can do. Let’s assign senior people to the most demanding areas, and work our way down to the junior ones. We have nothing to lose.”

As it turned out, the third- and second-class petty officers were so honored to be chosen that they worked hard enough for several of their teams to outshine those supervised by senior people. The outside inspectors protested, saying they could not validate the work of an important team that wasn’t headed by a commissioned officer. But the captain insisted, and his sailors did such a fantastic job that the inspectors ate their words and gave the Benfold Level Four in that category.

Breaking out of the stratified systems to trust people, especially those at or near the low end of the hierarchy, was a useful, progressive change. It allowed individuals with talent to rise to levels that no one had expected, simply by challenging them: Make the Benfold the readiest ship afloat. In that context, how could they not have done well?
Be the Rising Tide That Lifts All Boats

Since World War II the Navy has issued foul-weather jackets that are made of ugly blue duckcloth that keeps sailors neither dry nor warm. To the Benfold’s young sailors, they were a fashion statement not worth making. While browsing in a marine gear store, one sailor spotted a civilian version he loved that was made of blue Gore-Tex with reflective stripes and a built-in flotation device.

Naturally, he told the captain about it immediately. The Navy jackets cost $150 apiece; these were $90 and superior in every way. They would actually keep the sailors warm and dry, and they’d be safer than the standard issue because of the flotation device. As a bonus, “USS Benfold” could be stenciled on the back.

This was not the usual Department of Defense procurement; instead, this was more value for less money. “Great idea, sign me up,” Abrashoff said. They used the ship’s credit card to buy 310 jackets, passed them out to all hands, and had a very cool-looking and inspired crew.

The next day, when another ship pulled into Benfold’s pier, its sailors saw the Benfold crew wearing the jackets. Half an hour later, that ship’s command master chief strode over to say, “My captain has ordered you to stop wearing those jackets.”


“We almost had a mutiny over there — our crew wants the same jackets.”

According to Navy protocol, the senior officer present is responsible for a pier’s security, and he had decided that pier security was endangered because his sailors coveted the Benfold’s sailors’ jackets.

The master chief of the other ship was informed that Abrashoff considered the other captain’s order illegal and refused to obey it. If he insisted, Abrashoff would be happy to go to the admiral’s office and accept an immediate court-martial. The command master chief delivered the message and returned half an hour later with a new directive: “My CO has decided you can wear your jackets after all.”

That ship could have bought those jackets but never did. Meanwhile, the so-called “Benfold Jacket” became the rage, and the ship’s squadron commander ordered them for the five other ships under his command.

Jealousy and envy are powerful emotions and, if acted upon, can cause serious problems. A jealous commander may behave in ways that inhibit and paralyze his or her subordinates, who eventually turn off and tune out. The antidote lies in trying to make the people who work for you feel needed and highly valued. Help them believe in that wonderful old truism, “A rising tide lifts all boats.” With only few exceptions, every organization’s success is a collective achievement.

Generate Unity

One of the harder tasks of a leader or manager is to convince people to accept that they are all in the same boat. In the case of Benfold, this was literally true. Either they would support one another or the whole ship could be in critical trouble that no one could escape.

One of the toughest things for organizations to accomplish is to get people to set aside personal differences and work for the good of everyone involved. The task of the leader is to assemble the best team possible, train it, then figure out the best way to get the members to work together for the good of the organization.

Treating people with dignity and respect is not only morally right, but practical and productive. Unity became the fundamental purpose of Abrashoff’s leadership model. He achieved it because he and his crew learned how to make people want to belong to their 310-member club, ready to give their best to a fair-dealing ship that clearly valued them.

Improve Your People’s Quality of Life

Abrashoff feels that corporate America, like the military, is headed for a nervous breakdown. We are now permanently wired to our work, wherever we are. Even on vacation, we’re tethered to pagers, cell phones and laptops so we can log in from the beach. This is OK, in moderation.

In excess, it eats away at the inner reservoir of spirit that people need to draw on when life gets tough. If you work 70 or 80 hours a week and never take time out for a work-life balance, the reservoir doesn’t refill and soon you’re running on empty. When times get tough, the body may be willing, but the spirit will be out to lunch.

Abrashoff wanted to change that. When he interviewed his sailors, he asked them not only how to improve the ship’s performance, but also how to have fun at work. The responses were amazing.

Fun With Co-workers Makes a Happy Ship

One sailor said it would be neat if the ship had a stereo system and maybe once a week at sea the crew
could gather on the flight deck and watch the sunset while listening to jazz. Abrashoff did that.

Another sailor suggested a happy hour every Friday night at sea. Abrashoff was ready to break a lot of rules, but definitely not the one that bans serving alcohol on a ship at sea. Still, it’s possible to have happy hour without alcohol, or so Abrashoff decreed. Every other Friday night, the crew gathered on the mess decks for a feast. The ship also bought a karaoke machine.

Still another sailor said, “Why don’t we put a sheet on the back bulkhead on the flight deck and get a movie projector and show movies under the stars at night?” Abrashoff thought it was a fantastic idea and a step forward in unifying his crew.

Abrashoff tried to instill fun in everything he did, especially mundane, repetitive jobs such as loading food aboard the ship. He decided that music would make the job go faster. With the ship’s huge stereo system playing great tunes, it was a whole new scene. Everyone danced to the music, and the officers and chiefs supervising the work force ended up pitching in themselves. Music seemed to make even the most boring task fun — a lesson that somehow had escaped the U.S. Navy.

Having fun is a notion you can apply to any workplace, anywhere. Not long ago, Abrashoff proposed it to a conspicuously dour bank, and the managers looked alarmed. They said, more or less, “Fun isn’t allowed here. It goes against the culture of the organization.” But one of the managers broke ranks: “Why don’t we have Laugh-In once a month?” she asked. The others softened, albeit slowly, and the light finally dawned.

So now, one day a month, the bank’s once mirthless employees gather for a brown-bag lunch and sit together watching reruns of TV classics. These people had barely said a word to one another for days, if not decades. The last Abrashoff heard, they were actually laughing.

All this shows what you can accomplish when you throw formality to the winds and free your people to have a life on your time, which soon becomes the time of their lives. None of this required big money — only imagination and good will.

Life After Benfold

When Abrashoff’s tour of duty was over, it was time to hand over the Benfold to its new captain. The day before he was relieved, Abrashoff’s successor took him aside and said the Benfold was unlike anything in his experience. He did not want to become known as the one on whose watch the Benfold had declined. He asked Abrashoff what he should do, and Abrashoff summarized the Benfold playbook. His successor became a great leader. He was so highly valued that he was ranked the number one commanding officer in his squadron.

Abrashoff’s approach to leadership began as an experiment born of necessity, but it is not unique. In all sorts of thriving businesses, the managerial role has changed from order-giver to people-developer, from authoritarian boss to talent cultivator. The bottom line: It’s your ship. Make it the best.

Create a Climate of Trust

Once leaders have set the terms of the new social contact with their workers, they need to have the courage of their convictions. The best way to keep a ship — or any organization — on course for success is to give the troops all the responsibility they can handle and then stand back. Trust is a human marvel — it not only sustains the social contract, it’s the growth hormone that turns green sailors into seasoned shipmates and troubled companies into dynamic competitors.

But trust must be earned, and you earn trust only by giving it. When Abrashoff took over the Benfold, he found distrust throughout the ship. When an adversarial relationship among department heads is built into the system, it poisons the whole atmosphere. It divides the crew into factions, erodes their trust in one another, and reduces combat readiness.

One of the first things Abrashoff did was to tell his four department heads that their futures in the Navy depended on the overall success of the Benfold. Together, they would sink or swim; it does no good to have the best weapons department if the engineering department could not keep the engines running to get the ship into combat.

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