



U.S. Coast Guard officer candidates aboard Coast Guard Barque *Eagle* haul on fore upper topsail brace during sail stations at sea in Atlantic Ocean, September 16, 2013 (DOD/U.S. Coast Guard)

Butter Bar to Four Star

Deficiencies in Leader Development

By Benjamin Ray Ogden

It's incredibly easy . . . to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall.

—STEPHEN R. COVEY
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Ray Ogden, USA, wrote this essay while a student at the U.S. Army War College. It won the Strategic Research Paper category of the 2017 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategic Essay Competition.

Stephen Covey's insightful message reminds us that individuals and institutions create inefficiencies when their well-intentioned efforts veer from the direction of the desired destination. In national security parlance, unchecked ways and

insufficient means induce a hefty risk to achieve desired ends. Just such a disparity exists in the U.S. military between the various officer development programs and their ultimate objective: exemplary strategic leaders. Attaining the title of strategic leader depends on

mastering three advanced competencies: conceptual competency dealing with specific thinking skills, technical competency that includes knowledge of external systems, and the interpersonal competency of consensus-building and communication.¹ Yet the road military officers travel to acquire these competencies often contains hidden detours and obstacles that prevent them from becoming effective, relevant, and successful general officers within the strategic environment. Operating in this environment means curbing tactical expertise in order to deal with intense complexity, great uncertainty, unsolvable problems, vast time spans, interdependent systems, and dissimilar cohorts.² Fellow stakeholders are often civilian professionals with different educational and professional backgrounds, divergent thought processes, conflicting interests, and little experience operating in a tiered structure. Therefore, an officer's developmental process must include mastering civilian-military aptitude throughout the lifespan of a career, including a shift in standard mindset and actions so he or she is capable of keeping ahead of fast-moving complexity.³

This article carefully unpacks the ideas that rigid cultural norms, faulty officer management practices, and significant flaws in professional military education (PME) generate damaging gaps in the development of commissioned Army officers in the Active component. In fact, the analysis indicates that these discrepancies delicately nudge the Army toward sculpting its junior officers into tactically savvy and combat-effective generals instead of expert strategic leaders.⁴ The article concludes with recommendations aimed at reforming complacent systems, challenging conventional thinking, and rebalancing components of leader development models so all future flag officers emerge as proficient sources of strategic competency. Even though the study specifically indicts the Army's leader development program, the lessons can have implications that each Service should consider for the developmental well-being of its own officers.

Cultural Impacts to Officer Development

Cultural elements most influential to officer development center around the overwhelming importance placed on operational experience as the mainstream career pathway and the deep-rooted institutional behaviors that discourage critical thinking by its leaders. Most officers will acknowledge the validity of a balanced approach for healthy development, but cultural forces have eroded this balance, tipping the scale in favor of the operational domain. This particular domain encompasses training activities that units undertake, experiences within an operational or deployed setting, and education gained through unit professional development programs and local special skills courses.⁵ It equates to what officers gain while "online" in a unit or, more broadly, within their career track.

Prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with Servicemembers' patriotic duty to deploy in those wars naturally affect the emphasis for operationally focused learning. For a generation of officers, operational experience, training, and education have usurped all other forms of development and eventually appear as an unofficial condition in the selection process for promotions.⁶ This promotion indicator uncovers a belief that being tactically and operationally capable equates to being a successful flag officer and explains why officers hesitate to take assignments that are nonoperational for fear of falling behind their peers and jeopardizing the possibility to serve as a flag officer. A narrow-minded operational pattern develops among emerging leaders, even though "approximately 65 percent of one-star billets, 80 percent of two-star billets, 82 percent of three-star billets and 92 percent of four-star billets are nonoperational enterprise management positions."⁷ In essence, a skewed path for success, accompanied by misguided developmental criteria, emerges even though comprehensive development remains the gold standard for producing future senior leaders.

This operational fetish also leads to anti-intellectualism among Army leaders and their Service counterparts. Diverting from the operational field into assignments that build strategic thinking ability, such as advanced civil schooling, teaching, or fellowships, is traditionally undesirable and considered damaging to an officer's career.⁸ Many officers and, to some degree, promotion boards begin to believe that stepping away from unit leadership assignments to focus on individual academic development is an indictment of the officer's leadership abilities. A profound example of that assertion emerged recently when the Army failed to select four company-grade officers for promotion when their selection for advanced academic scholarships kept them from taking the traditional route of serving in tactical units.⁹ This operationally focused side of Army culture appeared in a broader scope as well. The Army's operational tempo over the years has caused myopic inclinations toward equipment modernization and readiness over restructuring its own PME system.¹⁰ These cases reaffirm the belief that time operating in units and operational capability are more valuable to an officer's leadership development than intellectually rigorous opportunities that result in strategic capacity.

Complacency toward officer self-development and assignment culture also enhances the gravitation toward operational development. Unlike enlisted leaders who follow a structured self-development model, Army officers' self-development consists solely of "self-initiated learning" to meet personal training, education, and experiential goals.¹¹ Because officers are strictly in charge of their own self-development, they tend to exert more effort toward succeeding in their current or next assignment versus following a tailored approach that nests with long-term career objectives culminating in strategic aptitude. In fact, over half of surveyed officers confirm that their most selected activities include professional reading, improving a skill they already mastered such as physical fitness, or networking.¹² These data imply that officer self-development basically

merges with operational development. Moreover, the length of assignment tours within military culture creates conditions where leaders feel compelled to lean heavily on operational topics as a matter of immediate self-interest. Officers generally do not spend more than a year in the same position and cannot be expected to have immediate proficiency with all aspects of a new job. Becoming proficient as a leader in these positions requires most of an inexperienced officer's time; therefore, developmental habits form relating to near-term operational tasks. Cultural aversion to intellectualism and neglected self-development end up pushing officers toward a singular focus on operational skills, leaving them critically shortchanged beyond the tactical realm.

While a mindset stuck in operational mode impedes officer development, the unwitting discouragement of critical thinking as a cultural anchor nearly derails it. Some psychologists define *critical thinking* as "reasoned thinking with a purpose" that "depends upon three core abilities: appreciating that your own opinions may be wrong; accepting statements as true even when they conflict with your own views; and temporarily adopting an initial position with which you disagree, and then reason from that starting point."¹³ Senior military leaders who embrace and master this art should have the ability to recognize their own biases, avoid fallacies, and objectively challenge assumptions when faced with new or existing ideas. These skills are vital for leading in the uncertain and rapidly changing environment where conventional solutions may be obsolete. But the Army's track record in this area presents a discouraging pattern.¹⁴ Past studies presented to the House Armed Services Committee have uncovered significant officer deficiencies in critical thinking due to lapses in officer development.¹⁵ Being able to apply objective and reasoned thinking requires constant practice, which expands beyond its use in academic settings alone. Even when used in Army academic institutions, the faculty only delivers critical thinking concepts and knowledge to students versus instilling in them how to apply them.¹⁶ If successful

and routine immersion of this practice into an officer's career is paramount, then the operating environment and culture need to allow reasonable skepticism to flourish; however, overt skepticism in any military setting clashes with conventional and traditional behavior.

Not unlike the other Services, the U.S. Army thrives on standardization and conformity, both as official and cultural customs, to reinforce disciplined behavior.¹⁷ These norms invariably conflict with the freedom to objectively assess an idea or situation, particularly if the idea is a standard practice. In organizations like the Army, a fine line exists between being skeptical in the name of critical thinking and nonconforming to embedded values such as duty and loyalty. Since pressures to conform in a group are substantial, failure to do so can result in being perceived as insubordinate or undisciplined, or even being sanctioned or expelled.¹⁸ Likewise, military organizations pride themselves on having a steadfast belief in traditions. Some traditions, such as rowdy military balls, host calling cards, and unit slogans, represent superficial and benign experiences. More operative traditions tend to originate from collective experiences relating to the creation and sustainment of an effective fighting organization that wins wars.¹⁹ These types of practices contribute to what makes organizations like the Army cohesive, so an officer showing skepticism toward them through critical thinking methods risks professional isolation and even survival in combat situations.²⁰ This phenomenon could render officers incapable of divorcing themselves of those norms even when overwhelming evidence exposes a contrary viewpoint. As a current consideration, one need look no further than the Army's continued use of an obsolete physical fitness test established in 1985, even though significant advances in physical training have emerged as better assessments of physical readiness.²¹ In the end, the culture of conventionality and tradition outweighs the urge to truly examine ideas, leading to a significant deficiency in the cognitive methods prized later in a senior leader's career.

Complementing conformity and tradition within Army culture, as well as military culture writ large, is the dependence on doctrine and regulations. As of the publication of this article, the Army Publication Directorate Web site displays 537 Army regulations and 16 Army doctrine publications in inventory, and that excludes hundreds of volumes of joint doctrine, local regulations, various degrees of standard operating procedures, and multi-echelon policy letters that lay the operating framework for Soldiers.²² Providing top-down directives for nearly every aspect of military life breeds outsourced thinking and makes it improbable that officers will spend time objectively questioning why or how something is done. Even if doctrinal leeway existed, most officers possess an innate aversion to the intellectual exploration that enables the critical thinking process. Army officers, in particular, tend to exhibit low levels of openness and high levels of decisiveness, traits that benefit leaders at the tactical level but ultimately cripple those who reach the strategic level.²³ In effect, the gross overkill of prescriptive thinking is both born from and satisfies the pervasive personality type of the officer population while also reinforcing a rigid and convinced mindset that is antithetical to challenging ideas. Even though the highlighted cultural artifacts play a large role in an officer's development, misguided talent management procedures lend further evidence of an inefficient leader development system.

Officer Management Practices at Play

It is safe to assert that several officer management practices present a different but no less serious obstacle to the development of strategic leaders. Assessments in 2014 found that only "46 percent of Active component leaders rated the Army effective at supporting the development of individuals through personnel management practices such as evaluations, promotions, and assignment selection."²⁴ Anyone looking at officer management influences must begin with the most significant document in a career's paper trail and center-

piece to officer promotions and selections, the Officer Evaluation Report (OER). Unlike enlisted leaders, officers never personally appear in front of promotion boards and selection panels. Boards and panels in charge of selecting officers for ranks and commands only conduct file reviews.²⁵ By far, the most important document in the file that determines the fate of the officer is the OER because board members spend the most time reviewing it, and it gives them insight into the leader's level of performance and potential compared to other officers.²⁶ The tyranny of the OER in determining the success of an officer should not be underestimated, so evident flaws within its structure and use have critical consequences for the quality of leader that emerges.

Structural flaws in evaluations discourage supervisors and senior raters from citing potential strategic leadership qualities that go beyond the number of tactical tasks accomplished. This defect, in turn, encourages officers to focus on tasks they accomplish and ignore the strategic leader attribute of being reflective about themselves and their experiences.²⁷ The danger of reinforcing accomplishments in this manner contributes to the development of an unwanted fixed mindset versus the more adaptable growth mindset. Someone with a fixed mindset believes their "abilities are predetermined and largely unchangeable," while a growth mindset is "the belief that one can cultivate and improve upon their abilities through practice and effort."²⁸ Constantly being recognized only for what one accomplishes causes the individual to develop a fear of failure and potentially avoid challenges. Conversely, being recognized for one's effort alleviates the fear of failure and promotes resiliency in the face of difficult situations, like those that resoundingly persist at the strategic level.²⁹ Fixed mindsets encouraged through OER practices can cripple officers once they become strategic leaders because problems at that level are fluid and virtually unsolvable. Our leaders must mentally evolve throughout their careers to focus on getting processes right versus seeking a clear win, but evaluations

reinforce the performance outcome instead.

Alongside ill-constructed OERs rests poor utilization of broadening assignments as developmental opportunities for officers. Broadening assignments expand an officer's experience and introduce new ways of thinking to ensure the development of multifunctional skills. This technique works, and many private companies achieve impressive results by using similar initiatives to elevate the thinking capacity of their leaders. Executives at General Electric, for instance, participate in programs that immerse them in underdeveloped countries with the purpose of exposing them to unique experiences in order to "promote reflection and self-awareness" as a developmental tool.³⁰ As a result, broadening offsets parochialism and a myopic mindset for those bound to lead in unpredictable environments by opening their mental approach to addressing challenges.

Unfortunately, trends for mind-broadening opportunities have been decreasing for many Army generals since the beginning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.³¹ The most obvious conclusion for this shortfall is simply that assignments supporting ongoing operations in the two major conflicts took priority. Operational assignments also dominate the landscape over broadening assignments for cultural reasons as witnessed through official administrative directives. Manning guidance issued after the announcement of troop withdrawals in Iraq and Afghanistan still prioritizes operational manning and only mentions broadening opportunities for officers as an objective versus a directed manning requirement.³² The tone of these official documents sends a clear signal that broadening assignments are secondary options and offers troubling insight into an institutional aversion to prioritizing these mentally enriching assignments.

Even though human resource managers stand alone as the primary executors of officer assignments such as broadening and joint opportunities, mentors have a significant role in managing an officer's career. Officers will use mentors to seek guidance and wisdom for career

assignment paths that will eventually land them in the highest strategic-level positions. This level of responsibility gives mentors a great amount of influence over the proper development of an officer. Yet not all officers subscribe to the idea of having a mentor to assist them in their development or career management. Army-specific surveys conducted in 2014 determined that only 57 percent of company-grade officers and 56 percent of field-grade officers reported actually having a mentor.³³ Unlike supervisors who have direct responsibility for coaching their subordinate officer, an officer protégé voluntarily seeks out and chooses a mentor based on trust and experience level. Therefore, this large minority of unmentored officers maneuver through their careers alone or with help solely from rotating supervisors and assignment managers. As a result, unilateral management techniques and inexperience cause officers to miss developmental opportunities or veer off track over a long career, while jeopardizing their full potential to serve strategic positions.

Those officers who do participate in the mentorship process face different challenges to their development. In general, mentors offer many more years of seniority and experience that greatly benefit junior officers. The vast difference in experience should be the most advantageous part in the relationship.³⁴ However, a mentor's guiding compass entails experiences that assisted in their path to success years before but that may no longer be the best path for an officer today. Mentors can unwittingly perpetuate poor choices of assignments because those types of assignments fit an outdated career model. In particular, successful commanders fall victim to this phenomenon. Historically, mentors have counseled the most successful commanders to seek more difficult positions in large operational commands and headquarters as optimal preparation for future promotion and command, simply because that path worked for them.³⁵ In addition, senior officers have a tendency to tether junior officers to them at new assignments because these subordinates have proved loyal, competent, and trustworthy in the



Upperclass midshipman gives briefing to first-year midshipmen participating in annual Sea Trials at U.S. Naval Academy, May 2012 (U.S. Navy/Chad Runge)

past. This technique potentially benefits senior officers and the units they serve, but it can severely obstruct junior officers from new experiences and ways of thinking that are beneficial to their development portfolio.³⁶ Senior officers acting as mentors will insist on pulling their highest potential subordinates with them to jobs and assignments that may not be the best fit for the career path of the aspiring officer. In the end, mentors and, more broadly, officer management practices have drastic effects on where an officer gains experience and how well that experience associates them with strategic competencies.

A Flawed PME System

Just as officers rely on the officer management system to provide them with the best duty positions for development, they also rely on PME programs to prepare them for future challenges. According to Eliot Cohen, “These educational programs have been optimal for

shaping tacticians and well-rounded military officers, but delinquent in generating the deep thinkers [who] sustain the military profession in the long run.”³⁷ His apt assertion seemingly contradicts the two-pronged purpose of PME: train for certainty in order to master one’s skills, and educate for uncertainty in order to attain critical thinking skills that assist in unanticipated and unpredictable situations.³⁸ PME is paramount to an officer’s development, but its effectiveness rating over the past decade has been dismal. Only 62 percent of Army company and field-grade officers surveyed believe that the institutional domain has been effective in their development or helpful in improving their leadership capabilities.³⁹ Such low confidence relates to significant flaws enmeshed within a PME system that adversely affects the intellectual progress of our future strategic leaders.

First, the PME environment lacks the intellectual diversity needed to challenge

students who are being primed for strategic responsibility. Military organizations create an environment that inhibits divergence, which naturally extends into professional academic institutions. Conformity and similarity engross all officers consistently throughout their military career. Because of uniform standards, everyone dresses alike. Officers reside in nearly identical government quarters. Most military communities, often geographically isolated, lack cultural variety compared to civilian neighborhoods. With the implementation of values systems, everyone adheres to a shared set of beliefs. Assignments often reunite the same work colleagues because of redundant location options. Even though leaders will move potentially dozens of times in a career, the units they serve resemble one another in almost every way due to intentional standardization. With such resounding similarity in the information, alternatives, and payoffs presented in everyday life, officers begin

synchronizing behavior in all aspects of lifestyle, to include patterns of thought.⁴⁰

Having such a homogenous lifestyle and environment is not necessarily a bad thing for operational and family readiness, but it drastically undermines intellectual diversity in a PME setting. Like-minded students who come from the same professional background or defense establishment predominantly comprise seminars at PME schools. The current structure keeps officers intellectually isolated and unable to escape military paradigms or enhance their critical and creative thinking ability by interacting with people who truly think differently.⁴¹ Even though the schools attempt to diversify the seminars by integrating government civilians and military officers from different Services, the composition lacks the necessary peer ratios that would otherwise expose students to adequate whole-of-government perspectives.⁴² PME becomes a meeting place for generally like-minded individuals to reinforce comfortable biases and, therefore, serves as a mechanism for institutional group-think. Student intellectual diversity is negligible in a purely military education program compared to a university that consists of students from various backgrounds, values, political persuasions, and education and who have alternative experiences and viewpoints.⁴³

Educational expertise and tenures of PME military instructors also have a hand in perpetuating the gap of intellectual diversity among students. The selection process for instructors lacks sufficient discernment and relies mostly on the normal personnel management system rather than a process that identifies proper subject matter expertise for the position in mind.⁴⁴ Without the considerate and thorough selection of military instructors, unmotivated personnel viewing these positions as detrimental to promotion or even incapable personnel can make their way into the PME system, virtually eliminating the impetus for challenging student thinking. Conversely, high-quality military instructors who challenge their students to broaden their mental capacity have limited time as PME instructors because their Service requires

them to move in accordance with normal permanent change of station timespans.⁴⁵ Acquiring unqualified instructors coupled with frequent losses of qualified instructors presents a major challenge with faculty management and contributes to the lessening of intellectual diversity among PME students.

In addition to lacking intellectual diversity, PME courses lack depth and applicability in the curricula at each level. To be clear, the curricula at the PME schools generally have pertinent topics and concepts that enhance leaders' knowledge; however, a shortfall exists in how quickly evolving concepts get implemented into the program. For instance, "other than some adjustments to accommodate counterinsurgency doctrine, the PME provided by military institutions in the past decade has largely remained constant in spite of rapid changes and evolving threats in the world."⁴⁶ To exacerbate this problem, most of the students attending PME courses since 9/11 have wide-ranging deployment experience and real-world application of the topics covered. Course content is often inferior to the level of a student's practical experience and does little to prepare them for immediate follow-on assignments and future strategic assignments.⁴⁷ Likewise, the academic programs that officers experience in PME can be characterized as survey-level curriculum, which offers limited exposure to professional topics and prevents a level of mastery needed for proper development of lifetime practitioners.⁴⁸ Even if the depth of the courses and diversity of students met higher standards, the efficacy of PME schools, particularly for the Army, presents a different test.

Like all academic institutions, military PME programs must have legitimate oversight, certification, and accountability in order to maintain competitive efficacy of student education. As an example, the Army historically fails to measure up to its civilian academic counterparts by having less than a quarter of its PME programs accredited by authorized organizations under the U.S. Department of Education.⁴⁹ This inequity causes future strategic leaders to migrate through a

more recognizably substandard academic pipeline than their civilian counterparts destined for the same strategic field. As an extenuating effort, the Army created the Army University to better integrate all PME schools under one governing body, provide synchronization of progressive learning objectives throughout an officer's career, and establish regional accreditation standards for Army education programs.⁵⁰ Although a significant step forward, the Army University has yet to earn the regional accreditation it desires for many of its tenant programs, leaving them devoid of the comparable oversight measures seen at other universities.

The final evidence underscoring the inefficiency of the officer PME system, in relation to the Army, rests with underwhelming general officer continuing education. By definition, all ranks of flag officer fall under the category of strategic leader, making them the end product for the various leader development models. However, officers encounter a steep drop-off of PME once they pin on stars. As a simple measure, Army officers complete 32 combined months of mandated PME as tactical leaders in their first 20 years followed by roughly 8 combined months as strategic leaders in the next 10 to 20 years.⁵¹ There are even plans of dropping the 8-month requirement further to just 6 weeks in total due to course restructuring.⁵² Also, courses that general officers attend only familiarize them with practical strategic concepts rather than immerse them into analysis of the kinds of complex situations they could face.

The Army simply stops educating its officers effectively once they reach the strategic rank of general, when those officers need it the most. According to a previous Army War College report, "Other professions such as physicians, lawyers, and professional engineers have requirements for continuing education, but the Army has very little beyond orientation courses" for its most senior leaders like general officers.⁵³ General officers can count on their attendance at one of the senior Service colleges being their last extensive experience within a PME program littered with flaws.

A Way Ahead

Applying comprehensive modifications to the leader development systems of the Army and the other Services would increase the effectiveness of military officers throughout their careers and, more importantly, once they reach the highest levels of leadership. The most crucial recommendation is that current senior-ranking officials acknowledge that high-potential officers have been shortchanged by a flawed development system. Recognizing the problem would provide the right energy for integrated solutions to flourish. Structurally for the Army, Human Resources Command and Senior Leader Division should merge efforts with the Army University in a leadership Center of Excellence framework. Officer management and leader development are inextricably linked, and continuing to compartmentalize them defeats the objective of producing the best leaders. The remaining recommendations involve measures to help balance and improve the systematic portions of leader development over the course of an officer's career.

Successful completion of a broadening assignment and earning a master's degree should be required to compete for battalion-level command. Additionally, the Army and applicable Services should structure officer self-development to ensure not only that officers expend effort in this critical domain, but also that the focus is comprehensive and preparatory for gaining the right future skills. These adjustments would assist in the much-needed change in operational culture. Officer management adjustments should begin with restructuring evaluations to account for more intangible strategic skills such as how much prudent risk the officer takes, interpersonal skills they display, and examples of critical thinking and self-awareness improvement. At the same time, promotion boards should be directed to equally consider these strategic traits along with senior rater remarks about potential. The Army specifically needs to incorporate academic competency measures into the promotion and selection process. Integrating academic evaluation reports and graduate-level

grades more vigorously into the process or conducting pre-promotion board exams would serve as forcing functions for officers to break the operational chains and seek out academic opportunities instead.

PME requires major improvements to enhance the institutional development domain. For intermediate-level education and senior Service colleges, give the top quarter of students the option to participate in an apprenticeship program with civilian companies and government agencies outside of the military during the electives period of school. A program like this allows immediate practice and exposure of lessons learned under strategically demanding settings. Next, increase the length of service and number of civilian and high-potential professors at the intermediate and senior Service colleges so that student exposure to challenging and diverse thinking becomes paramount throughout his or her academic experience. Finally, Army and the joint Services should consider better continuing education for flag officers. The Army Strategic Education Program is a good first step in the Army's case, but the piloted program greatly curtails general officers' education. Expand the program to at least 6 months for flag officer rank, forcing them to inflate their knowledge of the environment to come. This approach would supersede the current education model and allow for more in-depth study in preparation for the demands they will soon face. Similarly, including mandatory fellowships for all newly promoted one-star flag officers would jump-start their mental transitions and could be the final gateway in breaking from deep-rooted tactical tendencies.

U.S. Army generals and senior military leaders do not reach the highest potential possible over the course of their career. Do not misunderstand; flag officers today reflect some of the most adaptive, dedicated, and experienced tactical leaders that our nation has ever produced. However, their development as strategic leaders is the product of a system wrought with flaws in military education, inefficient officer manage-

ment practices, and cultural barriers. Today's senior leaders have to be more dynamic than their predecessors from the past century, but the leader development system fails to prepare them for a strategic environment that has increased in complexity, ambiguity, and speed in just a few decades. As a result, the development system forces officers to focus on achieving the most senior rank versus the highest competency needed by the senior rank. Applying Stephen Covey's message in the epigraph, senior officers have as much desire to climb the ladder of success as ever before; however, the Army and the other Services have yet to reinforce the ladder they climb and ensure it is, in fact, leaning against the wall of strategic competence. The stakes are too high for the next generation of officers and the national security institution as a whole to not overcome these blatant gaps. JFQ

Notes

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