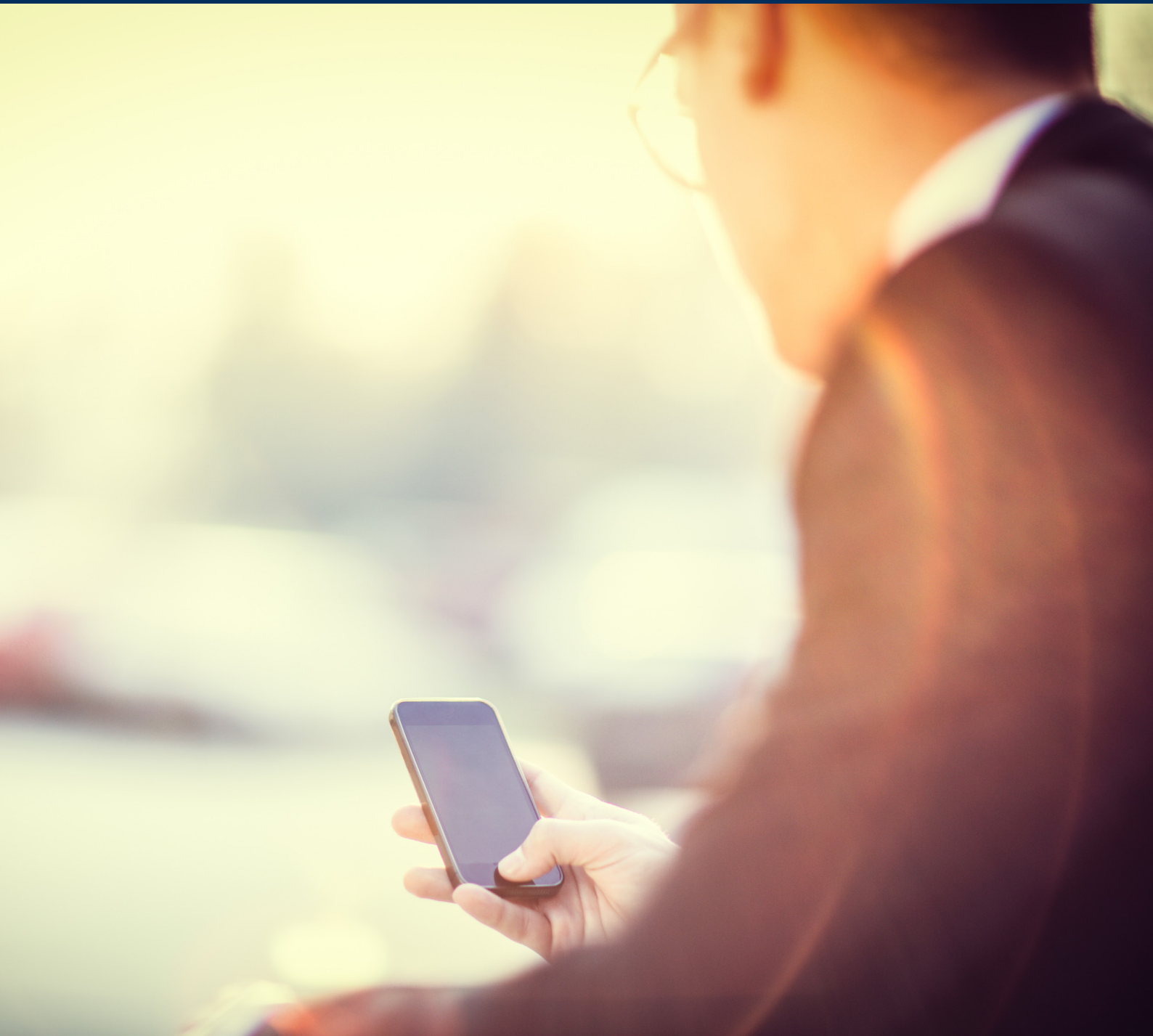


# The leadership competencies valued across cultures: getting things done.

Worldwide, people appreciate leaders of any cultural background if they deliver results.



# Introduction

It has become an article of faith among business executives across the globe that the leadership techniques that work in one culture won't necessarily be effective in another. While some cultures value the hard-charging, demanding leader, employees in a different culture might resent a boss who fails to build consensus among the staff. Workers raised in one culture might be seen as reluctant to highlight problems and setbacks for fear of punishment, while those in another expect to be praised for speaking up.

But that faith should be tested.

While certain leadership skills are deemed more important for success in specific cultures, some leadership competencies are universally endorsed, especially when it comes to getting things done. Every culture wants the leaders of its organizations to get results.

Tweaking leadership approaches to fit any specific culture doesn't require wholesale changes to the basic business culture, but is more a matter of nudging local belief systems in the direction of this emerging core set of leadership values.

**Globalization of business and business education creates workplace cultures that are becoming more similar to each other.**

# Leadership convergence.

As globalization has expanded business across the world at an increasingly rapid pace, executives have long assumed that leadership and management styles need to be significantly adjusted for the customs, beliefs, and values of the local workforce. That is correct—to a degree. More than a decade ago, research revealed that people in different cultures possess different assumptions about the personal attributes and behaviors of effective leaders (Bonnstetter, 2000). For example, people who are considered effective leaders in Anglo-oriented cultures tend to be more participative than human-oriented, while the opposite is true for people in Confucian Asian cultures (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004).

As business becomes more and more international, however, so does business education and leadership training. Consultants and business schools from Western countries have expanded their offerings into Eastern countries, while managers from the East are increasingly attending programs in the West. At the same time, business schools are standardizing and formalizing management training into fewer, more distinct models.

So while specific characteristics in workplace interactions continue to differ in how they're valued, interpreted, and received in any one specific culture, management goals, values and techniques are converging into one global set of values. It should come as no surprise to any savvy business executive that, regardless of the etiquette or preferred communication style, no culture on the planet values or celebrates the leaders of any organization that consistently produces shoddy products or regularly loses money.

Due to globalization and convergence of thought, contemporary organizations are beginning to adopt a “universal corporate culture” in which all members of the organization, regardless of their own national culture, have similar work values and beliefs that guide business interactions. This trend seems obvious, because, no matter where a business is operating, the day-to-day management challenges, business problems, and goals are very nearly universal (Gentry & Sparks, 2012).

# Leadership divergence.

Nonetheless, culture does play a role in leadership. The divergence perspective suggests that national culture drives the formation of values and beliefs more than commonality based on cross-national business and globalization. As a result, the respective views and beliefs of members of organizations will, for the most part, remain unchanged by the spread of business and globalization. Even with evidence of globalization and a rise in the number of organizations that are expanding and increasing their cross-national operations, employees from different cultures still retain work values and beliefs that are consistent with their respective national cultures. The challenge is how to tweak these converging leadership and management techniques

to fit specific cultures. In this way, recognizing and adjusting leadership techniques is more a question of tools and strategies to adapt those techniques while continuing to emphasize the core leadership values needed to achieve the organization’s goals.

## Where culture matters.

There are five distinct aspects of national cultures that leadership researchers take into account when considering the differing responses to leadership characteristics. As defined by Hofstede (2010), the dimensions of cultural styles are:

<p><b>Small Power Distance vs. Large Power Distance</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How less powerful members of the culture accept and expect that power will be distributed unequally</li> <li>• Small power distance cultures value equalizing the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities</li> <li>• Large power distance cultures accept a hierarchical order</li> </ul>
<p><b>Individualism vs. Collectivism</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whether the self-image in a society is defined as “I” or “we”</li> <li>• Individualism emphasizes loosely knit social frameworks where individuals care for only themselves and their immediate families</li> <li>• Collectivism includes tightly knit social frameworks where group members exchange care for unquestioning loyalty</li> </ul>
<p><b>Masculinity vs. Femininity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described as “tough” versus “tender” cultures</li> <li>• Masculine cultures value competition and achievement orientation, including heroism, assertiveness, and material success rewards</li> <li>• Feminine cultures emphasize consensus, cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak, and quality of life</li> </ul>
<p><b>Weak Uncertainty Avoidance vs. Strong Uncertainty Avoidance</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures value practice over principles</li> <li>• Strong uncertainty avoidance cultures maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and dismiss unorthodox behavior and ideas</li> <li>• A culture’s degree of comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity, and whether people attempt to control or accept the unknowable future</li> </ul>
<p><b>Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree of emphasis on short-term vs. long-term thinking</li> <li>• Long-term orientation cultures maintain traditions and norms, and are suspicious of change</li> <li>• Short-term orientation cultures approach change pragmatically and emphasize preparation for an unpredictable future</li> </ul>

# Different, but the same.

The idea of “different, but the same” is illustrated by the simultaneous divergence and convergence across cultures in leadership styles, as seen in a recent study of results across cultures of 360° feedback ratings, where employees receive anonymous ratings from managers, peers, and direct reports and provide their own self-ratings (Tang, D’Mello & Dai, 2017).

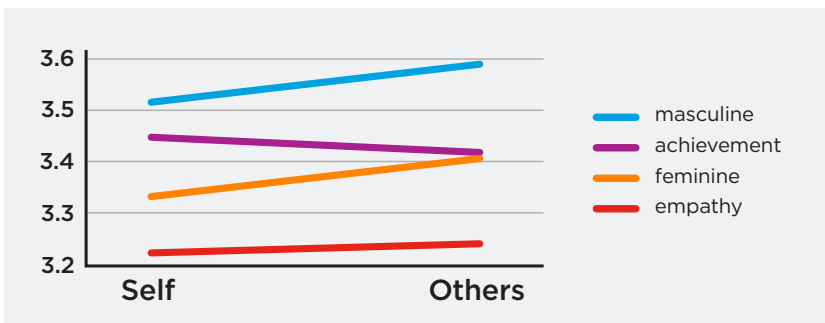
The link between culture and competencies was explored using Hofstede’s (2003) model of cultural dimensions. Conceptually relevant leadership competencies were

identified for four of the five cultural dimensions.<sup>1</sup> For instance, masculine cultures prefer achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Behaviors such as drive for results, action-oriented, career ambition, and command skills would be leadership skills considered important in masculine cultures. In contrast, feminine cultures prefer cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak, and quality of life. Feminine cultures would support or cultivate leadership behaviors such as understanding others, listening, compassion, and work/life balance.

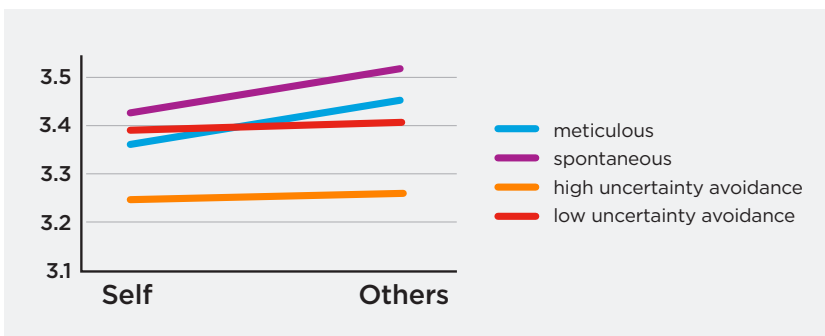
Cultural Dimension	Competency Cluster	Cultural Dimension	Competency Cluster
High Power Distance	<b>Managing up</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political savvy</li> <li>Comfort around higher management</li> <li>Boss relationships</li> </ul>	Masculinity	<b>Achievement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drive for results</li> <li>Action-oriented</li> <li>Career ambition</li> <li>Command skills</li> </ul>
Low Power Distance	<b>Egalitarian</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approachability</li> <li>Delegation</li> <li>Fairness toward direct reports</li> <li>Developing others</li> </ul>	Femininity	<b>Empathy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding others</li> <li>Listening</li> <li>Compassion</li> <li>Work/life balance</li> </ul>
Individualism	<b>Personal influence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Standing alone</li> <li>Conflict management</li> <li>Managerial courage</li> </ul>	High Uncertainty Avoidance	<b>Meticulous</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Priority setting</li> <li>Planning</li> <li>Process management</li> </ul>
Collectivism	<b>Communion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer relationships</li> <li>Building effective teams</li> <li>Interpersonal savvy</li> <li>Caring about direct reports</li> <li>Personal learning</li> </ul>	Low Uncertainty Avoidance	<b>Spontaneous</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dealing with ambiguity</li> <li>Dealing with paradox</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> The competency library used in this study was revised to the current 2016 Korn Ferry Leadership Architect (KFLA; Korn Ferry, 2016). See the Appendix for a mapping of the original competencies to the 2016 KFLA.

In both masculine and feminine cultures, competencies aligned with striving for achievement, including driving for results, being action-oriented, and possessing career ambition and command skills were rated higher than more empathetic competencies, such as understanding others, listening, compassion, and managing work/life balance. Masculine cultures rated both the achievement and empathetic skills higher compared with feminine cultures, but both cultures scored the ability to produce results higher than other competencies, and at nearly identical rates.



Similarly, in both high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures, prudence competencies, such as setting priorities, good planning, and effective process management skills, were rated higher than spontaneous competencies, such as being able to deal with ambiguity and being good at handling situations involving paradox. Again, while both sets of competencies were rated higher in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, the ability to plan and manage work was ranked significantly higher in both cultures.



Other cross-cultural similarities emerged when looking at the discrepancies between how workers rated themselves versus how they were rated by their superiors.

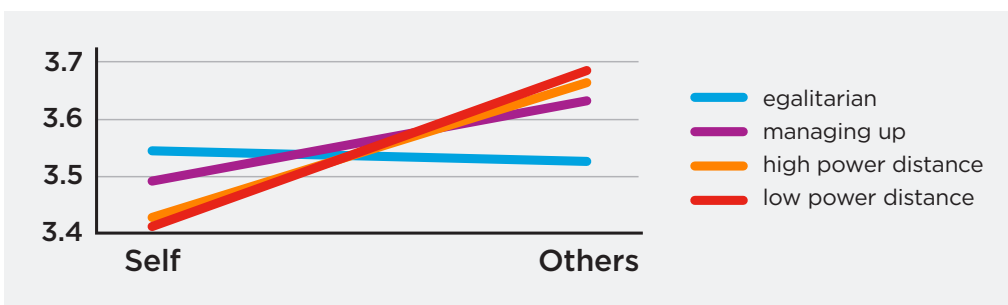
In cultures with both high and low power distances, individuals tended to rate themselves higher on empowerment competencies, such as approachability, ability to delegate tasks and responsibilities, fairness in treating their direct reports, and developing others on the job, as opposed to competencies that revolve around sensitivity to the organization’s hierarchy, including the individual’s degree of political savvy and level of comfort around members of higher management.

On the contrary, members of those same cultures tended to be rated by their managers as more skilled on the hierarchy-sensitive competencies than they were on the empowerment competencies, with workers in both high and low power distance cultures considered by their managers to be much more sensitive to the business’s hierarchy than the workers rated themselves.

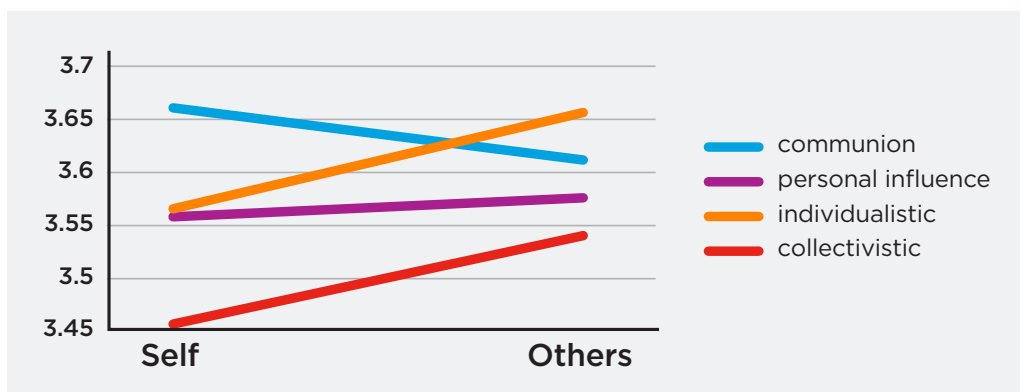
The same pattern of similarly expressed values showed up in reviewing the 360° feedback ratings of employees in individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

In both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, individuals tended to rate themselves higher on communal building competencies that include the importance of developing good peer relationships, building effective teams, demonstrating interpersonal savvy, caring about their direct reports, and exhibiting personal learning, as opposed to such personal enhancement competencies as the ability to stand alone on an issue, how well the individual managed conflict, and the extent to which the person displayed managerial courage.

And, in both types of cultures, the 360° feedback ratings indicated that their managers rated them higher on demonstrating personal enhancement skills than they rated themselves.







While the degree to which individuals in the different cultures rated each competency fluctuated, there was a distinct pattern where certain skills that relate to core beliefs about effective management and leadership consistently were rated higher relative to other skills seen as less important to overall achievement. Within each culture, the discrepancies between how individuals rated themselves versus how they were rated by others remained distinct, and did seem to be influenced by the values and beliefs of the specific culture. However, several core competencies always topped the list. In sum:

- Regardless of whether individuals are from an individualistic or collectivistic culture, individuals tend to rate themselves higher on competencies related to collectivism over individualism, suggesting the importance of cultivating a team environment. Interestingly, others' ratings on individualistic competencies tend to be higher than self-ratings, suggesting that individuals may try to downplay their own individualistic competencies.
- Ratings on masculine competencies are significantly higher than scores on feminine competencies regardless of being part of a masculine or feminine culture. Competencies such as drive for results, career ambition, and command skills define effective leadership to many individuals regardless of the culture.

- In terms of both self and other ratings, individuals from high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to have higher ratings on controlling competencies than tolerance for ambiguity-related competencies.
- Finally, regardless of high or low power distance, managers consider employees to be more sensitive to the business' hierarchy than employees consider themselves.

These examples illustrate that, while convergence is seen in the relative importance of a number of core business competencies, divergence continues to show up in specific areas of the evaluations, especially the gap between self-evaluations and ratings on others, that need to be evaluated with an eye toward distinct cultural values and influences.



## Conclusion: Adapt the basics.

Multinational organizations of all types are beginning to adopt a single dominant corporate culture which—no matter the national influences that apply to any single individual—emphasize a core set of work values and beliefs to guide business interactions.

However, the ways in which those values are applied and the tools to support and integrate those values and goals into an organization will continue to require that organizations and executives adapt their methodologies to account for local cultures. The success of the core leadership and managerial competencies in any one location will depend on how leadership styles are adjusted to be effective in that specific culture.

When it comes to leadership, there's still no one-size-fits-all approach that can be exported across all regions and cultures, either through training or the assignment of executives. Training programs and approaches will need to be tweaked to be effective in the local culture, as will the approaches of individual managers. It will remain crucial, however, to select leaders who possess the core, universal competencies expected in any culture, regardless of where those executives come from and where they are assigned. The key will be to emphasize the converging core competencies, while anticipating and managing the remaining divergent aspects of cultures.

Effective organizations will be those that work to understand the impact of culture while still hewing to the basics of successful leadership.

# Appendix

Mapping of competencies used in this study to the current 2016 Korn Ferry Leadership Architect (KFLA) competencies (Korn Ferry, 2016). The original library used 67 competencies, whereas KFLA uses 38, hence some competencies do not have a direct mapping in the 2016 KFLA.

Original competency	KFLA 2016
Political savvy	Builds networks
Comfort around higher management	Organizational savvy
Boss relationships	
Approachability	
Delegation	Directs work
Fairness toward direct reports	
Developing others	Develops talent
Standing alone	Ensures accountability
Conflict management	Manages conflict
Managerial courage	Courage
Peer relationships	Collaborates
Building effective teams	Builds effective teams
Interpersonal savvy	Interpersonal savvy
Caring about direct reports	

Original competency	KFLA 2016
Personal learning	Situational adaptability
Drive for results	Drives results
Action-oriented	Action-oriented
Career ambition	
Command skills	Courage
Understanding others	Values differences
Listening	Communicates effectively
Compassion	
Work/life balance	
Priority setting	Plans and aligns
Planning	Plans and aligns
Process management	Optimizes work processes
Dealing with ambiguity	Manages ambiguity
Dealing with paradox	Situational adaptability

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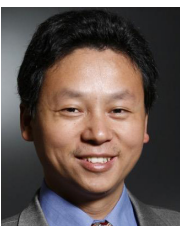
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