

Interweaving Positive and Critical Perspectives in Management Learning and Teaching

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This is an author post-print version, that is, the authors' final version as accepted for publishing after peer review but prior to copy editing and final layout. For reading and referencing the paper in its final version please see Lavine, M., Carlsen, A., Spreitzer, G., Peterson, T. Morgan Roberts, L. (in press, 2022). Interweaving positive and critical perspectives on management learning and teaching. *Management Learning*, 53(1): 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211057650>

Abstract

Management learning is increasingly and rightfully called upon to address societal challenges beyond narrow concerns of economic performance. Within that agenda we describe the generative aims of a special issue devoted to interweaving positive and critical perspectives in management learning and teaching. The five manuscripts that comprise the issue describe prospects for such interplay across a range of empirical and theoretical contexts. Together, these contributions suggest a way forward for work that is at once critical, positive, and reflexive. We identify key themes for future directions: the generative learning potential of contrarian dynamics, an ethics-first focus on ecological and human wellbeing and the prospects of scholarly practice for systemic activism.

Key words: Positive organizational scholarship, critical management studies, management learning and education.

In the wake of current societal crises—including the covid pandemic, structural inequalities, racism, ongoing ecological disasters and threats to democracy—the functions and forms of institutional arrangements for management learning and teaching have increasingly been called into question. What is management learning *for*? Is it for the pursuit of instrumental knowledge or deeper meaning that raises a sense of conscience about the human condition, society and its many challenges (Holt, 2020)? Should management learning, for example, target diversity primarily for the sake of business or a humanizing agenda? Should it put green business opportunities or socio-ecological wellbeing first, given that the two may be in conflict (Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2020; Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021)? What are the socially privileged *ends-in-view*, as Dewey (1922, 1929) would say, of the kinds of inquiries we try to facilitate in management learning and teaching, and what are the democratic functions of such inquiries (Evans, 2000; Festenstein, 2019)? These are daunting questions that cannot be fully answered in any one collection of scholarly work. We nevertheless take inspiration from them when exploring the interplay between positive organizational scholarship (POS) and critical management studies (CMS). These are two research traditions that both pursue fundamentally reflexive aims of asking large questions to realize notions of the good organization. Yet, they have rarely talked to one another. We hope to stimulate such a conversation by: interweaving positive and critical perspectives in pursuit of emancipatory aims

In this introduction to the special issue, we start by elaborating its motivation and charting two broad aims. We go on to describe the contributions of the five papers that we selected for the special issue, and then look across them to identify three broad avenues for further inquiry.

Why positive perspectives on management learning and teaching?

One important aim for this special issue is to encourage inquiry into how positive organizational perspectives can enrich management learning and teaching. The lenses of positive organizational scholarship (POS) (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), positive organizational behavior (Luthans & Youssef, 2007), appreciative inquiry (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011) and humanistic management (Pirson, 2017, 2020) emphasize an ethical, humanizing approach to organizing that challenges the primacy of instrumental outcomes, encourages pro-social norms, and fosters the well-being of organizational members. Scholars using a POS lens have explored topics such as positive relationships (Creary, Caza, & Roberts, 2015; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Gittell, 2016; Methot, Rosado-Solomon, Downes, & Gabriel, 2020; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012), generative dynamics related to leadership and followership (Cameron, 2013; Lavine & Cameron, 2012), meaning making (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010), positive emotions (O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017; Sawyer & Claire, in press, 2022), diversity (Creary, McDonnell, Ghai, & Scruggs, 2019; Roberts, Wooten, & Davidson, 2015), dignity (Stephens & Kanov, 2017), respect (Rogers, Corley, & Ashforth, 2017), resourcing (Feldman & Worline, 2012), citizenship behavior (Methot, Lepak, Shipp, & Boswell, 2017) as well as compassion at work (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012).

To date, this positive lens on organizations has received modest attention in the literature on management learning and teaching. Examples include work on energy audits (Spreitzer & Grant, 2012), playing to one's strengths (Roberts et al., 2005), strengths based leadership (Spreitzer, Stephens, & Sweetman, 2009), strengths-based teaching (Liesveld, Miller, & Robison, 2005), and the growth of relational agency in executive education (Sundet & Carlsen, 2019). The influence of a positive lens has also been documented in books on learning (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2002; Liesveld et al., 2005; Quinn, Heynoski,

Thomas, & Spreitzer, 2014), and significantly through widely used classroom and organizational tools, stories (Peterson et al., 2020) cases, videos, and exercises such as Job Crafting, Reciprocity Ring, and The Positive Leadership Game. Overall, though, there remains much to be learned from applying POS research and practice to build better learning and teaching environments.

A second aim for this special issue is to encourage more interweaving of positive and critical perspectives in the field of management learning and teaching. Critical management studies (CMS) is known for exposing and challenging power asymmetries and structures of domination, paying attention to that which is marginalized, and for questioning the taken-for-granted in social orders (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007; Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009), including in educational practices (Heizmann & Liu, 2018; Wright, Forray, & Lund Dean, 2018). Both positive and critical lenses offer reflexive spaces for moving beyond instrumentalism and pursuing a humanizing and emancipating agenda. Yet, with few exceptions (A. Caza & Carroll, 2012; B. B. Caza & Caza, 2008; Cunha, Rego, Simpson, & Clegg, 2019), they are rarely combined. That is so in spite of critiques of both traditions calling for more cross-pollination across conventions of affirmation or critique (A. Caza & Carroll, 2012; Fineman, 2006; Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009). We therefore ask: how can research on management learning and teaching, as a form of systematic social inquiry, take on simultaneous qualities of offering critique and surfacing possibilities for reaching desired outcomes? How can a language and practices focused impediments, obstacles and deficiencies of management learning and teaching be complemented with amplifiers and facilitators such as resource unlocking, capacity creating, and strength building (Spreitzer, Myers, Kopelman, & Mayer, 2021). The interplay of positive and critical lenses has the potential to enlarge the reflexive space of both CMS and POS (Roberts, 2006), licensing scholars to be more fully engaged in making management learning matter (Bell & Bridgman,

2017) and strengthening the tradition as a form of social inquiry into the good organization (Cunha et al., 2019; Nilsson, 2015).

We invited both empirical and theoretical contributions and are broadly interested in research that addresses how interweaving positive and critical perspectives can enable better practices of management learning and teaching beyond instrumental outcomes and including, but not limited to, what goes on in the classroom. We also welcomed critiques of these perspectives and encouraged consideration of “shadow sides” or possible risks, challenges, and unintended consequences of positive perspectives. We received many interesting submissions and are excited to share with you the five articles that comprise this special issue.

What Unique Contributions Do These Papers Offer?

The articles range from the empirical to the theoretical and represent the efforts of fourteen scholars in five countries. Each piece offers practical insights for educators and provides implicit or explicit insights into the generative potential of combining critical and positive views.

In “Non-Naïve Organizational Positivity through a Generative Paradox Pedagogy,” Cunha, Simpson, Rego, and Clegg (2022) use the inherent tension of paradox to offer both a mindset and pedagogy of “generative paradox” for educators. The authors describe this distinct variant as “a learning orientation that appreciates paradox as constitutive and integral of organization, one mindful of the complexities inherent to addressing paradoxes but in a manner that promotes mutually beneficial flourishing, thriving and wellbeing...” (p. xx). The authors eschew a binary or dualistic view of positive or negative phenomena showing how the two are inextricably intertwined. They show how injustice, inequality, and other endemic social forces can be considered alongside processes that aim to enhance the human condition even amidst structural challenges. The authors also explore how ethical virtues may serve as

a resource and/or indication that organizations are aiming to grapple with paradoxical tensions in a generative manner. The same generative paradoxical mindset and pedagogy that the paper illustrates how to cultivate in learners, also serves as a useful lens for considering the remaining papers in the special issue.

In “The Courage to Teach with Compassion: Enriching Classroom Designs and Practices to Foster Responsiveness to Suffering,” Worline and Dutton (2022) explore the largely unspoken spreading of suffering and corresponding need for compassion in management teaching. Invoking the notion of rhizomatic structures allows the authors to address the social and institutional rooting of suffering of teachers and students alike. The paper suggests that while alleviating such suffering in the management classroom through compassion may require more than overly individualized views and simplistic answers, there is nevertheless a responsibility to craft approaches that increase the likelihood for compassion to happen. To this end, the authors specify relational practices for enriching human recognition of suffering in the classroom as well as practices for designing roles and networks in teaching that enable compassion. This is a paper that richly combines critical and positive perspective and that ends with a spirited call for action that suggests both individual and systemic initiatives.

Such a call for action to foster compassion in management classrooms is further developed by Tallberg, Välikangas, and Hamilton (2022) in “Animal Activism in the Business School: Using Fierce Compassion for Teaching Critical and Positive Perspectives”. These authors extend thinking on compassion beyond the Anthropocene when they attend to suffering caused by industrial exploitation of animals. In so doing, they articulate a specific form of activist-minded compassion that they dub “fierce compassion” to connote the intensity that propels activists to raise consciousness about social issues. The authors combine insights from critical and positive traditions to examine how surfacing and

confronting people with animal suffering can be coupled with proactive approaches to social change. They remind us that the need for fierce compassion flows beyond moments of alleviating human or animal suffering to engage managers and others in combatting systemic injustice and thus in tackling grand challenges more broadly.

In “Toward a Pedagogy of Connection: A Critical View of Being Relational in Listening”, Hinz, Stephens, and Van Oosten (2022) explore a topic basic to all teaching and learning, as well as to high-quality connections, compassion, and social change: that of listening. The authors critique listening education, noting that it often has an almost mechanistic, intrapersonal focus rather than one focused on interpersonal dynamics and deeper mutuality inherent in human connection. They draw on experiential learning theory to advance a more conversational conceptualization of learning with a focus on “being relational” in listening. Yet, the authors also problematize these notions as they acknowledge and consider how power and status differences among conversation partners can impact both informal communication and facilitated learning processes.

In “Teaching Multiple Approaches to Management to Facilitate Prosocial and Environmental Well-Being,” Dyck and Caza (2022) provide an empirical example of the kind of generative pedagogy described by Cunha et al (2022) while also following in the footsteps of Tallberg et al. (2022) in extending the POS agenda beyond the Anthropocene. The authors describe a non-coercive means whereby students who primarily espoused a shareholder-only, financial bottom line orientation came to understand, and in many cases embrace, more expansive views, particularly of prosocial and environmental wellbeing. The authors note that teaching multiple approaches satisfies key elements of critical performativity (Spicer, Alvesson, Kärreman, 2009, 2016). Further, the social and ecological thought perspective taught to students contains both critical and positive aspects, and the authors use this as an opportunity to note shared terrain among the two traditions.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate how critical and positive perspectives can be mutually constitutive and generative in achieving more humane and environmentally just outcomes through management learning. Furthermore, critical and positive considerations can make for more robust theorizing when considered together. For example, Hinz et al. (2022) provide more useful and nuanced instruction when they consider power asymmetries at the same time that they seek to heighten high quality relations. Cunha et al (2022) note that theorizing that is “mindful of the complexities” that include both critical and pro-social considerations can better and more realistically equip learners for the complex realities they will face in the workplace and world. Dyck and Caza (2022) remind us that despite ontological differences, critical and positive perspectives share some aims and thus can generatively enrich one another. The articles challenge ideas of managerialism and the logic of economic rationality that confines human experience (Lavine et al., 2019: 2). They also suggest ways to promote and develop more humane forms of management (Fournier (Fournier & Grey, 2000) that eschew profit-first values when making management decisions (Adler et al., 2007; Cameron et al., 2003).

Towards a positive and critical perspective in management learning and teaching

What have we learned across the five papers in this special issue, and what does that imply for further research into management learning and teaching? We chart three sets of insights that are variously tied to the papers. These insights speak to some of what POS can offer the field of management teaching and learning but also include deliberate provocations about how POS can be further developed when critical perspectives are included in the inquiry. This does not mean abandoning the core tenets of the tradition and its many findings, but to expand the imagination of practices and qualities in how one may theorize and work to mobilize resources for humanizing and liberating outcomes. In short, we suggest that such an expanded inquiry marks a positive *and* critical approach to management learning and

teaching. It involves challenging the positive as the privileged frame of attention, the organization as the primary level of analysis, and scholarship as the only mode of engagement.

Beyond positive to the generativity of contrarian dynamics of learning

The simultaneous invocation of a positive and critical agenda in management teaching and learning suggests an expansion towards the generativity of contrarian dynamics of learning. As argued by Cunha and colleagues (Cunha et al., 2022), and extending previous critique (Fineman, 2006; Carran & Caza, 2012), a one-sided attention to the positive project can lead to a form of binary dualism, overlooking the generative potential of the negative in certain contexts as well as the negativity of the positive. Similar reservations to a one-sided negativity has been voiced within the critical tradition. Critique may be over-simplified (Fenwick, 2005), be voiced antagonistically rather than engaging with people (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), and lack a language of possibility (Kurucz, Colbert, & Marcus, 2014) or a complementary ethics of care (Gabriel, 2009). Ensuring a generative dynamic means somehow holding both poles in play (Cunha et al, 2022) where agency may emerge through the tension (Putnam, 2018).

To exemplify, it seems less than a coincidence that two of the articles in this special issue (Tallberg et al., 2022; Worline & Dutton, 2022) center on compassion, a field of POS research where the negative dimension of pain and suffering has been given much attention from the start. Both articles deliberately surface negative rather than merely positive experiences (ref. Nilsson, 2015), whether speaking to the unspoken pain of teachers and students in universities (Worline & Dutton, 2022) or the cruelty inflicted on animals for economic gain (Tallberg et al., 2022). Both articles also attend to how the potentially

generative dynamics compassion can bring with it new dilemmas and vulnerabilities. Enacting compassion in the classroom may be seen as an added plight to already overloaded professionals and ineffective in dealing with deeper roots of suffering (Worline & Dutton, 2022). Surfacing the horrors of animal suffering may put both teachers and students in vulnerable positions (Tallberg et al., 2022). Classrooms are learning environments characterized by power asymmetries where educators call the shots and with the best intentions of engaging students emotionally may yet end up contributing to coercive dynamics (Wright et al, 2019). Relatedly, the Covid pandemic has also reminded us that classrooms are sites where we see the need and opportunity to create intentionally inclusive and equitable learning environments at all levels (Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020), including management education. While certainly not a final antidote, interweaving lenses that avoid either naïve positivity or one-sided antagonistic critique may build learning spaces that present students with choices and possibilities for action and where teachers may take on roles of creating pockets of inclusion that can seed social change.

A related point here is evident in the conception of positive and negative forces feeding off each other (Cunha et al 2022), namely the necessity of turning to process. Such a need is particularly well illustrated in the paper by Hinz, Stephens, and Van Oosten (2022). Good listening, a critical ingredient in the literature of high-quality connections, is not a descriptor of stable qualities of interactions, nor a scripted skill that is easily taught. Rather, according to Hinz et al (2022), listening has potential darks sides. It is achieved, or not, in moment-to-moment interactions. The mutual responsiveness and interest in attending to the other is a delicate affair where negative potentials for one-sided instrumentality always loom. Likewise, hope has been theorized as a positively charged quality of experiencing that may be heightened by the totality of what is at stake, one where despair, loss and trauma lurks under the surface (Carlsen, Hagen, & Mortensen, 2011), yet has been obscured in much

survey based research. Indeed, recent process research on the formation of hopeful cultures expose how hopelessness may be an inevitable companion of hope (Sawyer & Claire, in press, 2022). The dualities of negative versus positive broadly points towards a need for more process oriented and longitudinal studies. The promise would be to avert a flattening of experiences into quantified averages and a recognition of continued existence of fragilities and ambiguities as part of what are generative processes.

Beyond organizational performance to human and ecological well-being

A second expansion of POS in management teaching and learning involves going beyond the organizational level and towards the primacy of ethical ends. As a tradition of research, POS has grown through principal attention to issues of well-being, thriving and flourishing at an individual and organizational level (Cameron et al., 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Scholars in this tradition have from the start had a clear humanistic intent (Carran & Caza, 2012) but also often voiced a dual focus on human well-being and organizational performance (Cameron, 2020; Grant, 2013). This has taken the shape both of demonstrating a range of performance outcomes from POS themes such as thriving, care and compassion and also by working backwards from positively deviant performance to better understanding of underlying causalities and phenomena (e.g. Sonenshein, 2014). While impressive in terms of research output, this has also been paralleled by a well-known critique of potentially subverting positivity to financial gain and managerial ends (A. Caza & Carroll, 2012; Cunha et al., 2019). The papers in this special issue chart pathways of putting ethics of human and ecological well-being *first*. Teaching multiple approaches to management students can have the function of changing students' views from a profit-first orientation towards ecological wellbeing (Dyck & Caza, 2022). Generative paradox is explicitly

developed as a force for good (Cunha et al., 2022). Teaching “being relational” in listening involves favoring mutuality rather than instrumentality (Hinz et al., 2022). Compassion in business school education, whether directed towards colleagues or students (Worline & Dutton, 2022) or animals (Tallberg et al., 2022) are not motivated by considerations of performance and may, to the contrary, emerge against a background of institutional regimes of exploitation.

Across all these papers we see the emergence of a form of ethics-first critical positivity. Such a shift means abandoning the implicit or explicit assumption that acting ethically will necessarily pay off. Socio-ecological well-being lies beyond green business development that may amount to mere green washing (Moratis & Melissen, 2021). The “value-in-diversity” lies beyond instrumentality and reductionistic definitions where “everyone is diverse” approaches may conceal rather than reveal systemic racism (Roberts, 2020). As convincingly chartered by Lynn (2021), there is scant evidence to support universal claims that economic performance is either predicated on or precluded by ethical behavior. Championing a “good-ethics-pays” framework may lead to undue celebration of heroic exemplars and a reduction rather than fostering of moral agency. There seems to be much room here for a kind of critical positivity, a good-ethics-*may-pay-but-is-always-first* approach that promotes a continued inquiry into human and ecological well-being, not by disregarding exemplars of organizations that manage to do good and well simultaneously, but by also being critically sensitive to contingencies and counterexamples.

A shift towards ethics first as the primary justification of POS also implicates moving beyond the organization as the preferred analytical unity. Previous work on positive institutional and social change (Golden-Biddle & Dutton, 2012; Nilsson, 2009, 2015) has taken steps in such a direction. Moreover, the seeds of POS research have recently been heralded as an example of scholarly engagement that is needed and possible also in striving

towards sustainability (Howard-Grenville, 2021). Here we side with Dyck and Caza (2022) in suggesting that attention to systemic vulnerabilities and inequalities during the Covid pandemic has accentuated needs for ecological well-being as a “gateway issue” to expand the research and teaching of POS. Such a move would entail both opportunities and challenges in terms of enriching management teaching and learning; opportunities because where would descriptions of resource unlocking and capacity building (Spreitzer et al., 2012) be more needed; challenges because the systemic dimension is so central in sustainability (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Bansal, Grewatsch, & Sharma, 2021) yet relatively new territory within POS. Such a shift may ultimately also involve forms of academic activism.

Beyond scholarship to forms of systemic activism

Systemic issues of research linked to grand challenges of the functioning of universities, as well as human, animal, and ecological well-being, are inherently political in questioning priorities and social agendas. These are issues that may require systemic activism in management learning and teaching, defined as “a type of activism that recognizes the systemic, complex, and interconnected nature of the problems it sets out to address and, by implication, assumes that change is required on many different levels” (Moratis & Melissen, 2021, p. 6) Several of the papers in this special issue are bold in that they embrace such important but messy systemic issues. Worline & Dutton (2022) acknowledge the societal rooting of suffering in universities and place their work within the discussion of the performative university (Jones et al., 2020). Tallberg et al. (2022) use some of the classic arsenal of critical theory such as denaturalizing and surfacing taken for granted mechanisms of exploitation and transgression (Spicer et al., 2009). Dyck and Caza (2022) advocate for a socio-ecological thought perspective to business that pushes back against traditional financial bottom line or even a more progressive triple bottom line perspective.

Systemic activism suggests a politics of engagement by researchers that stretches beyond presenting value-free and neutral science, beyond stretching for singular metrics of productivity and impact that are disconnected to the wider societal issues and their politics (Rhodes, Wright, & Pullen, 2018; Williams & Whiteman, 2021). Indeed, and still following Dewey (Alexander, 1993; Dewey, 1922, 1929; Evans, 2000), all scientific inquiry is value-laden and potentially political in nature, in particular in not simply involving “the will to act upon goods already known but the will to know what they are.” (Dewey, 1929, p. 255). This begs the question of whether there is a POS-version of systemic activism in management learning and teaching and what such activism may look like.

Here we do not wish to be conclusive. We acknowledge and encourage many articulations of how and why scholars must understand the political nature of their work and embrace forms of activism, including intellectual activism (Collins, 2013; Contu, 2020), but also directly targeting the systemic level. A recent article on radical engagements of scholars into sustainability may be indicative of what is involved. Ergene et al. (2020) argue that climate change and its coupling with the socio-economics of income inequalities present systemic problems of an epidemic nature that the current political economy is unable to address. What seems needed are paradigmatic shifts in engagement where the overall challenge for scholars is to help create “social change by aligning research, teaching, and service activities with social and environmental justice and ecological wellbeing” (Ergene et al. 2021, p. 1328). Broadly speaking, this may help managers to imagine new ways of organizing, mobilizing resources and facilitating collaboration in interorganizational networks that address systemic change. Roles of such radical deep engagement (Williams & Whiteman, 2021) can for example include (Naberhaus & Sheppard 2015, pp. 56-65 as referenced in Moratis & Melissen 2021, pp. 6-7) the “broker” (creating meaningful connections and learning cycles between networks of systemic change) or the “gardener”

(naming, connecting, nurturing, and illuminating the pioneers of a new system). A third role may be that of using educational settings to strengthen affective bonds with the natural environment (Moratis & Melissen, 2021), or other beneficiaries of systemic change. Research-based practices for such strengthening and sensitivities are very much on the agenda of POS, where one talks about forms of perspective taking (e.g. Grant & Berry, 2011), awakening compassion (Worline & Dutton, 2017) or invoking wonder (Carlsen & Sandelands, 2015) of the natural world.

The calls for systemic activism also arise from voices attending to issues of social injustice in management classrooms and their broader institutional setting (McCluney, King, Bryant, & Ali, 2020; Roberts, Mayo, & Thomas, 2019). Many educators and community members shy away from candid examinations of structural inequality, systemic racism and other forms of persistent exclusion. The call for emancipatory learning environments (Freire, 1993) invites full consideration of the experiences of dominant and marginalized groups in our classrooms and work organizations, and critically examining the power dynamics and integrated systems of discrimination and exclusion in organizations. Nkomo, Bell, Roberts, Joshi, and Thatcher (2019) caution against binary distinctions between mainstream and critical approaches to diversity in the workplace and a dichotomy between individual and structural explanations for inequality.

There is a tendency in the calls for systemic activism that it is assumed to take a critical stance only. But critique alone may be associated with apocalypse fatigue where a sense of inevitable doom produces numbing passivity and stops people from affirming promising pathways for action and imagining new possibilities (Shellenberger, 2020; Stoknes, 2014). Taking inspiration from the articles that provide this special issue, we hope that the interweaving of positive and critical perspectives offers possibilities for a range of overt activism to more robustly do good within and beyond organizations.

Conclusion

We hope this special issue will enrich the theory and practice of management learning and teaching through the interplay of positive and critical management perspectives. The five papers provide some first steps in this direction. Taken together they show an array of means where positive and critical perspectives can be combined with generative results for greater depth and impact. We posit that such a development involves a threefold push towards 1) embracing the generativity of contrary dynamics of learning, 2) going beyond organizational performance to putting systemic issues and the ethics of human and ecological well-being first, and 3) pursuing forms of system activism that also makes use of a positive lens for resource mobilization. We hope these perspectives will function as door openers that move you to consider the interplay of positive and critical in your own research or in your own classroom.

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