Reflections on a Self-Managed Library Team

A Self Study

Michael J. Aloi and Joyce R. Gotsch

The self-managed library organizational model is a rarity in academic libraries. However, in an attempt to keep pace with the continuously evolving information needs of their users, librarians have discussed and explored various applications of self-managed teams and reported on these in the literature over a period of years. Somewhat uniquely, the full-time librarians at Dowling College have operated in such a structure for fourteen years. This model was well established at the institution when, in 2005, the library implemented a self-study to assess the level of staff satisfaction with the self-managed team (SMT) model. The process and results provide valuable management lessons for any library that implements a team structure in whole or in part, at either the management or individual project level.

Dowling College is a medium-sized, comprehensive college founded on a liberal arts tradition, located on the south shore of Long Island, New York, on a former Vanderbilt estate. The college library, housed in the main classroom building of the Oakdale campus, is currently staffed with nine full-time, faculty librarians, twelve part-time librarians, and approximately twenty support staff in circulation and technical services.

In 1993, the provost of the college eliminated the position of library director and reorganized the library on an academic department model, headed by a department chair. The professional librarians were all made equally responsible for different areas of the library's collections and services; the chair, while coordinating library operations, was not hierarchically superior to the other librarians. Because of the unique nature of the library faculty's union status at Dowling, librarians are not allowed to "manage" or "supervise" anyone. The full-time librarians compose a self-managed team while the remaining library staff is organized in a hierarchical structure. Thus, a manager of support services position was devised to oversee all of the circulation, technical services, and student staff members. This person does not report to the department chair, but instead reports to the academic provost along with the department chair. Weekly departmental meetings

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with recorded minutes keep everyone in communication and address issues. Department decisions are made by consensus or majority rule.

The library department has operated with relative autonomy through years of campus-wide administrative turnover, due in large part to consistent high praise from both its users and various accrediting bodies. It was not until 2005, when outside inquiries about the departmental structure began to be received, that the team members began to question the degree of success or failure of the model and to formulate a need for assessment and self-evaluation. Input received from the nine full-time librarians not only addressed questions that were being asked from the outside, but also raised the collective consciousness of the Dowling librarians by having them answer questions about the value and utility of the model.

Literature Review

In order to determine the range of issues to be examined in the study, the researchers conducted a literature review The goal was to identify issues reported at other institutions and at Dowling College, and to group them into categories. These would then be used as the framework for a survey instrument. Four categories of interest were distilled from the literature; they were:

- **Team meetings.** Young describes the crisis-induced, rapid implementation of a self-managed reference team at the University of Albany in 1993.[1] A critical factor for his team's success was the level of priority each individual team member placed on team meetings and the efficient use of time in those meetings. Davis expresses another concern regarding participants' comfort levels at meetings, especially those with minority or unpopular opinions.[2] Janto scathingly decries the ability of SMTs to come to consensus and unanimously decide anything.[3] A significant issue that surfaced at Dowling was whether or not team meetings facilitate consensus decision-making, or whether they result in frustration and deadlock.
- **Job responsibilities.** To a large degree, job responsibilities at Dowling smoothly transition with the changing nature of academic library service. A relevant

question, raised by Young, is whether the team members should periodically rotate tasks.[4] Would there be value in cross-training? Davis mentions the necessity of fairness in the division of labor within the team.[5] Bohannan further stresses the importance of adequate autonomy for each team member.[6] At Dowling, a key issue was the process of departmental and individual goal-setting in a self-managed environment.

- **Professional development.** Whether team members receive adequate feedback regarding their performance with no boss or specific reporting head has been cited as a problem with SMTs. Young echoes this same concern for obtaining external feedback, both from the team, but also within the library, and from departments, students, and administration outside the library.[7] In this regard, Davis emphasizes that cohesiveness of a team is partially due to the mentoring role assumed by all members towards each other.[8]

- **Leadership.** Bohannon outlines the role of an "external leader" and emphasizes the importance of the effectiveness of this person in facilitating the functioning of the team.[9] Young, in quoting Nichol, raises the question of a turnover rate of team leaders.[10] Janto assumes in an SMT everyone should take a turn but questions whether everyone should be required to serve as leader if he or she is not particularly well-suited to it.[11] Young also discusses the importance of administrative support in the success of teams and the importance of establishing a frequency for goal reviews.[12]

Research Method

The decision was made that in order to gather information on these issues, the best approach to the self-study at Dowling was to conduct individual interviews of each member of the team. The researchers constructed questions addressing key issues identified from the literature review, including some locally topical questions. Of the nine members of the team, one declined to be interviewed. The tenure of the eight remaining participants ranged from seventeen years of service at the college (since the inception of the team structure), to a new team member who had only been with the library since the start of that academic year. All team members, including the researchers, would be interviewed, the results collated, then shared anonymously with the team in a handful of discussion sessions. This would result in feedback about possible changes or improvements to the self-managed team structure.

The interviews were conducted in private, with the questions asked by one researcher and the answers recorded by the other. The researchers switched asking the questions or recording answers for each participant. In order to make the responses inclusive of the entire team, the researchers were included in the interview process,

with each researcher asking the questions and recording the responses of the other. Questions were asked one category at a time. Respondents were given an opportunity to give additional feedback on any issue they chose at the end of each session. Once the interviews were conducted and responses collated, the results were shared with all librarians during the course of four team meetings.

In order to preserve anonymity of the responses, the researchers transcribed them into one document, with each question followed by its eight responses. To summarize for the purpose of facilitating discussion, the issues were examined to determine if there was general consensus on one side of an issue, or if the responses were more diverse. Prior to the discussion phase, responses for each question were reviewed to determine how strong a consensus there was on each issue, and dissenting views were presented using text from the transcripts themselves. Participants then understood diverse opinions on an issue, but anonymous examples were shared to represent those points of view. Discussion thus served to reaffirm the team's consensus on an issue or to start a brainstorming session to examine if a change in policy should be implemented.

Discussion

Category 1: Team Meetings

This category consisted of five questions, two of which elicited a strong consensus from the respondents, while the others provided various levels of disagreement (see figure 1).

Question 1: Do all team members see team meetings as a priority? Six of the eight responses agreed that they did. Of the two negative responses, one thought that once-a-week meetings were routine and found the extra time useful when one was canceled. The other mentioned that attendance was not considered as critical as other activities, so meetings were often missed. The team determined during discussion not to implement a strict attendance policy, as this could foster resentment and cause members to miss too many other opportunities. However, members agreed to keep informed about decisions made at meetings, and to facilitate this, minutes of team meetings were to be scanned, converted to searchable PDF documents, and made available online.

Question 2: Are team meetings an efficient use of time? All agreed that team meetings could be very efficient if the team leader or moderator keeps the meeting and agenda on track. Prolonged or tangential discussions reduce the efficiency of the meeting and sap the group's mood and strength. But, librarians questioned whether an arbitrary time limit should be set to speed the meetings along. This step has been taken elsewhere: for example, in the written procedural norms of RefTeam at the University of Albany, which limited meeting times to one hour.[13] The

Dowling team decided that an arbitrary time limit was not necessary, but chose instead to change the meeting agenda format. Previously, the library department coordinator (an elected member of the team) chaired all meetings and led discussions. Under the new format, each team member leads the discussion for his or her agenda items only, streamlining the process.

Question 3: Are team meetings the best venue for effective decision-making? There was consensus with a qualified "yes." Most respondents agreed that a team meeting is the best venue because everyone has the opportunity for input, can hear everyone else's opinion, and leaves the meeting informed. The qualification came from an opinion that not all types of decisions were best served by this model. It was suggested instead that some decisions, particularly ones that are specific to a narrowly defined issue or particular area of the library, should be made by individuals who are responsible for that area or by a sub-group of members most likely to be affected by the decision. To keep meetings focused, such decisions should be made ahead of time and brought to the team meeting for feedback only. All team members agreed with this assessment and were encouraged to create subcommittees when appropriate, rather than waiting for a team meeting so they could be charged with a task they already knew needed to be done. The team will also formalize all ongoing subcommittees.

Question 4: Are all team members comfortable expressing minority opinions during team meetings? In a self-managed structure, "each person has an equal say and stake in the governance of the department. No one member has more power, or more authority than another. This method of representation protects the newest members of the department from being overshadowed or intimidated by more senior members. Team equality allows newer ideas to be heard."[14] However, this only works if all members of the team are comfortable speaking out. Three of the respondents admitted to trepidation about expressing a minority opinion. A solution proposed during discussion was that the department coordinator, no longer in charge of the agenda, could moderate each discussion and watch for steamrolling or other aggressive behavior.

Question 5: Do team meetings facilitate consensus decision making? These are real concerns in the self-managed structure because, as one respondent put it, no one has the authority to "drop the hammer." Janto believes that claims of achieving 100 percent consensus in team meeting decision-making is a fallacy.[15] Five of the eight respondents agreed with that assessment for various reasons. One claimed that team members would often "choose their battles" and relent when something is not important to them. Another claimed that difficult decisions often drag on, depending on who is in attendance and how strong their feelings are. Some members may not relent on an issue, even if they are in a minority. Providing meeting minutes online can prevent decisions getting made behind members' backs. Also, not setting arbitrary time limits can prevent issues from going away because time ran out. However, it was pointed out that complex issues will often be discussed outside of meetings, and members of like mind will return to them with predetermined positions. Members were encouraged to share these positions during meetings.

Category 2: Job Responsibilities

The literature suggests that an advantage of self-managed teams is the flexibility the structure allows for periodic reinvention of job responsibilities. Without an actual authority figure or "boss" to define job descriptions, it is incumbent upon the team as a whole to update and divide responsibilities in the library. But does this work in practice? For the five questions in this group, there was again broad consensus for two of them, with some disagreement on the others (see figure 2).

Question 1: How comfortable are you with the possibility that your job responsibilities may change over time? Seven respondents were comfortable, either having encountered this situation previously or seeing it as an opportunity to learn and grow. Only one respondent preferred the "security of knowing my place and what I'm doing." Team members are proactive
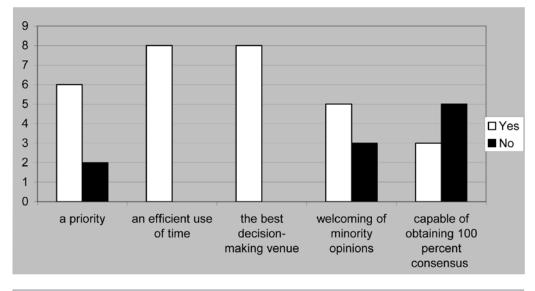

Figure 1. Category 1: Team Meetings

in continually reinventing their jobs. Dowling College provides time and support for professional development activities, as members encourage each other to try new things and enhance their skills. The team also created the opportunity for members to present their "vision statements," where they could request a thirty-minute time slot at a team meeting to share their thoughts of the direction in which they see their job and its responsibilities evolving. This also provides the opportunity for other team members to get a better understanding of what they do and fosters collaborative possibilities.

Question 2: How fair is the division of labor among job responsibilities? As Davis noted, "[t]eam members want to divide the labor fairly and effectively."[16] Five of the eight respondents believed that the division of labor is fair; but comments were made about certain jobs being more visibly productive or the differential pace of some workers. Of the three who disagreed, specific areas were identified (for example, collection development and technology-related tasks) as excessively cumbersome. Perhaps the most interesting response was that while there may be an overall equal distribution of tasks, there is not an equal distribution of essential or time-sensitive tasks. This can result in certain members feeling overworked at times. Members were encouraged to be forthright with the team about needing help in situations that are overwhelming. Minor job responsibilities can always be shifted between members to relieve the burden or the team may agree that certain responsibilities can be put off temporarily while a more critical matter is being attended. Members were also encouraged to utilize other available labor forces to help with simple tasks. Circulation and technical services staff, part-time reference librarians, students, graduate assistants, and interns are all available and have assisted in the past.

Question 3: How important is the cross-training of employees to perform responsibilities within the team? Cross-training can help in a crisis and can be extremely rewarding, as one member of Albany's RefTeam "pointed to the annual rotation of duties as a 'learning opportunity'"[17] However, with no authority figure to take charge, the issue of cross-training must be addressed in order to keep job functions moving in the event of an emergency, such as illness or resignation. There was a general consensus at Dowling that cross-training was necessary but only for emergencies. It was noted that individuals were hired with or developed specialties in certain areas. While cross-training was seen as a valuable opportunity for growth, it was deemed an inefficient use of time if not regularly implemented.

Question 4: Are all team members satisfied with the level of autonomy of their positions? According to Bohannan, in order to develop self-management characteristics, "group members need tasks that are meaningful, provide substantial autonomy, and generate informative feedback about progresses and outcomes."[18] It was clear that a tremendous level of autonomy exists for all members of the self-managed team. Whether the self-managed style created a sense of autonomy in the minds of team members is another measure of the model's success. Several expressed satisfaction at being able to control their own areas and create their own system for performing their job functions. Team members agreed that when unforeseen problems arise in the library, this autonomy should be used to adjust workload and responsibilities in order to handle these situations effectively. Also, autonomy is not limitless; members still need to share their accomplishments with the team and account for their performance in annual self-evaluations.

Question 5: Are all team members satisfied with the goal setting process of the library? Without a director to set policy, members of self-managed teams must take it upon themselves to define goals for the successful future of the library. Each team member is doing a different job, and it is unclear who develops, modifies, and evaluates the strategic plan for the library. This is done annually when the Dowling team has a planning day each summer. Five of the eight respondents believed that it is effective in helping the library understand, alter, redefine, and meet its goals. However, discussion suggested that the goals should be revisited every six months because of the possibility of losing sight of long-term goals. Thus, the team decided to have two planning days each year, one in the summer and an update during the January intersession.

Figure 2. Category 2: Job Responsibilities

Category 3: Professional Development

In this category, four questions focused on the growth of team members, particularly through performance feedback and mentoring. This section yielded the most diverse responses of the whole self-study (see figure 3). At issue was whether the self-managed style could adapt to a framework or structure for delivering performance assessment feedback to team members, because this typically flows from the top down in hierarchical management structures. Two kinds of feedback were assessed: internal (from within the team) and external (from non-team members in the library as well as outside the library).

Question 1: Is the performance assessment feedback that you get from your peers within the team sufficient? Responses formed a general consensus that feedback is good, and more feedback is better, as long as it remains informal. All team members, both tenured and non-tenured, submit annual self-evaluations to the college administration every year, as do all faculty on campus. In addition, non-tenured team members are formally reviewed by a committee of all tenured librarians. Most respondents reacted skeptically to any additional form of internal evaluation, with one citing the variety of each librarian's job responsibilities and the inability of other librarians to accurately evaluate each other's efforts. The comfort level with the current system was sufficient that the team decided not to implement any changes.

Question 2: Is the feedback that the team receives from non-team members within the library sufficient? The risk at Albany, according to Young, was that "RefTeam had in effect established a dual system whereby reference librarians outside the team had been marginalized."[19] Responses at Dowling were mixed with regard to feedback from non-team members from within the library. Three respondents claimed it was sufficient, citing an informal transfer of information from staff to librarians. Three others claimed the exact opposite, stating that library staff will often see themselves as subservient to the self-managed team and do not offer candid feedback. Two respondents avoided the question entirely. During discussion, it was noted that while the team occasionally holds additional meetings involving the library staff, and the part-time reference librarians use these opportunities to provide feedback, these extra meetings are often sacrificed when the team has more pressing business. Taking steps to ensure more open meetings on a regular basis in the future was proposed.

Question 3: Is the feedback that the team receives from outside the library sufficient? Five of six respondents believed that it was of limited quantity and usefulness. Again, the same two respondents avoided the question, with one stating that because the feedback from both within and outside the library is entirely informal, this results in the library receiving extremely positive and extremely negative feedback from a handful of expressive people, with a "vast nothingness" in between. However, the library is incorporated in the college's survey of both current students and alumni, the results of which most team members were unaware. To address this, the team has decided that more structured feedback focusing exclusively on the library is necessary and plans to apply the LibQUAL service quality instrument in a coming budgetary year.

Question 4: Do you feel that the self-management team provides adequate mentoring for new team members? A self-managed style of governance assigns equal status to all members, so that "team members also assume a mentoring role, assisting each team member to grow and succeed."[20] This may be intimidating to new members of the team and frustrating to the longer-tenured members of the team. But does this equality necessarily hamper the ability of the more experienced members to mentor the newer ones? Six of the eight respondents felt that the level of mentoring of newer members was adequate and that new members are encouraged to speak up at meetings and told that their opinions will be valued. Responses also indicated that mentoring is a neverending process, since even the tenured librarians often go up for promotion and need advice. Two members indicated that more mentoring was preferred but did not indicate whether they had actively sought it; thus, the team was reminded that informal mentoring is always available, but must be sought. Another tip from a more experienced team member was for the individual in need to set up a personal meeting with
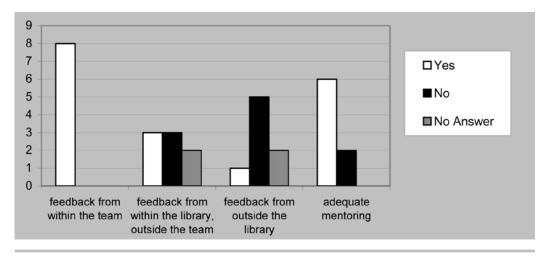

Figure 3. Category 3: Professional Development

the college provost, who is the administrative member of the library's internal personnel committee.

Category 4: Leadership

The final three questions dealt with the leadership issues raised by the implementation of the library self-managed team (see figure 4). Although there is no single authority figure within the SMT or within the library, this does not mean that the team and its members are not being evaluated. The team meets monthly with the college provost, the administrative overseer of the library, in order to keep her informed and assist her advocacy of the library at higher administrative levels. The provost has this opportunity to provide feedback regarding her impressions of the direction set for the library by the self-managed team. Team members are also subject to annual personnel reviews by a college-wide faculty personnel committee for the purposes of promotion and tenure. This body evaluates individual team members on issues such as research and scholarship activities as well as service to the college. Also, user and alumni surveys are performed frequently to assess the effectiveness of the library. Finally, outside accrediting bodies, such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, require periodic reports and self-assessments specifically from the library.

To assess leadership within the team, it must first be understood that the lack of an authority figure does not mean that nobody steers the ship. The library team has a department coordinator who functions in some ways as the team leader. The first step in understanding the role of team leader is to grasp that this position is a *facilitator*, not an authority figure. As Bohannan writes, the leader should not be concerned about expressing control, since the authority now rests with the group, but effective at building a support structure for the other team members, oftentimes acting in a role similar to a counselor.[21] The researchers did not set out to evaluate the current team member holding the coordinator position, but rather the effectiveness of the position itself, as designed.
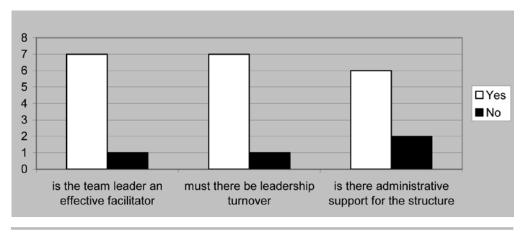
Question 1: Does the team leader/department coordinator facilitate the effective functioning of the team? Seven of the eight respondents believed the position works very well. Phrases like "point person" and "contact person" were used multiple times. The one dissenting view expressed concern that the department coordinator may evolve into a de facto administrator and lose the ability to effectively represent the team. However, because the self-managed library team exists within the larger framework of the college's hierarchical structure, there is a need for a person through whom information can flow into and out of the library. Since the majority of the team was comfortable with this arrangement, no changes were implemented.

Question 2: Should the role of the department coordinator turn over? According to Nichol, "[i]t is always wise to rotate team leadership. If the same person is always the team leader, the team members may feel that teams are really no different than hierarchical management."[22] Seven of the eight respondents suggested term limits (ranging from two to four years). Only one thought it should be indefinite. Discussion suggested that the rigors of the position usually resulted in a willingness to allow for adequate turnover. There was no need to deviate from the current system of holding an election every two years, with no term limit. However, Janto also pointed out that a flaw with self-managed teams is that if the leadership position is rotated, there are some who do not want that responsibility; "[w]hen their turn in the rotation comes up, they tend to shirk their administrative, managerial burden."[23] Respondents stated that efforts were made to allow all interested parties a turn at the role, while accepting the fact that not all members would be suited or interested. Thus, there is no requirement for all team members to take a turn in the lead role.

Question 3: Is there sufficient administrative support for the structure? The self-managed library team must be able to interact with the rest of the institution, most of which has a hierarchical structure. For this and other reasons, according to Pearce and Ravlin, "[m]anagement support [is] one of the preconditions for successful self-regulating work groups in establishing successful teamwork."[24] Thus, it is important to gauge the administration's opinion of the self-managed governing of the library. Six respondents believed that the administration supports the self-managed library structure and mentioned the financial savings of not having a library director or dean as the most likely reason. In the two negative responses, the perception

FIGURE 4. Category 4: Leadership

was that the administration sees the library through its own hierarchical lens. Administrators were thought to view the department coordinator as "the boss," down to the newest team members who would be viewed as lower-level employees.

During discussion it was pointed out that because the provost of the college is the member of the college administration with the most oversight regarding the library, keeping her informed about the library and its activities was the best way to maintain administrative support. The team decided that minutes of all team meetings would be sent to the provost, and one team meeting each month would be designated a "status update" meeting, where each team member would update the team on the ongoing projects in each area. This meeting would be coordinated in advance with the provost's schedule to ensure her attendance.

Conclusion

The self-study results at Dowling College indicated a general satisfaction with the SMT model, reinforcing the value placed by the librarians on the structure. At the same time in 2005, the college contracted with ACT Survey Services to conduct current student and alumni surveys. More 1,200 student responses rated the library number 1 out of 23 college services evaluated. It was the only service with a rating higher than 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. A survey of 293 recent graduates rated the library higher than the national private college norms in terms of overall experience. The most recent Middle States report from 2003 identified Dowling library's programs and services as clear strengths of the college. In comparing these results to the team survey, it appears that the positive experiences for librarians in the SMT structure translated into positive experiences for library users.

Moving forward, the effectiveness of the SMT structure will continue to be assessed, just as library users will continue to be surveyed in the future. A critique of the 2005 team survey is useful. By including questions on issues derived from the literature, in addition to those that were originally identified of interest to Dowling College, the survey instrument and resulting discussions incorporated both in-house issues and the lessons learned from the self-management struggles at other institutions. The questions helped identify where consensus existed and on what issues the team disagreed. The categorization of the questions into the four main areas allowed for separate discussions. The choice to address each category at separate, weekly departmental meetings assured sustained interest and engaged participation by the group. Each week's discussion was focused, resulting in constructive suggestions for new procedures and norms and an agreement to periodic reviews.

Among the lessons learned, spreading the discussions over four separate meetings meant there were slight variations in participants. Not all meetings were attended by all nine librarians. Additionally, some of the questions were closed-ended and thus may have stifled the breadth of the responses. The small size of the participant group, the desirability of including the researchers in the group, and the need for anonymity all would have been better served by utilizing an outside interviewer. Also, certain survey questions could be reworded to be more open-ended. This self-study was tailored to meet the needs of a self-managed team from a small library with a unionized faculty. However, the questions are equally relevant to any library that utilizes a team-based approach.

Large university libraries that have chosen to implement self-managed teams tend to create those teams at the department level to maintain a manageable size. Even large libraries with multiple teams need to address these same issues, such as whether team meetings run efficiently, accomplish goals, and respect all members' input, whether the work assigned to the team is distributed fairly, and assuring team members are comfortable changing responsibilities, cross-training, and working autonomously. Self-managed teams from libraries with non-unionized faculty may have an added dimension of including library support staff on its teams. This might reduce the feelings of marginalization by staff and mitigate their hesitation to provide feedback. However, the interview questions are still relevant when asking if the team is receiving and responding to feedback and whether the team has an effective leader and sufficient support from library management.

The Dowling College library self-study provided a valuable review of unwritten group interaction norms and led to the emergence of written group norms. It provided the platform for a new self-awareness amongst its members and raised the team to a new level of operational maturity. Because the composition of the department changes regularly as a result of sabbaticals and periodic resignations, which drastically influences group dynamics, the team intends to revisit the literature and assess the model again in two years. Further examination of self-managed teams in different types of libraries could identify other issues to be incorporated into a future self-study. Additionally, observing the initial implementation of an SMT at another institution would provide an opportunity to compare issues that surface with those identified in this self-study. This research may dispel some of the concerns surrounding the SMT model and present the structure as a useful option worthy of consideration for library management.
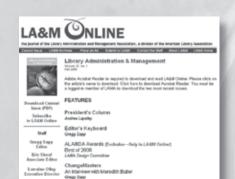
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