

# A Solid Foundation for Servant Leadership

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**ABSTRACT:** Many Christians have identified servant leadership as the appropriate form of leadership for Christian disciples. Several writers have critiqued that perspective and suggested that modern servant leadership theory might not be built on sound biblical practices. In this article, the author will consider arguments against servant leadership as a Christian perspective, especially those proposed by Locke (2019). The author will acknowledge that there are some legitimate concerns raised but also argue that some of the expressed concerns may be overstated. Finally, the author will present a path forward toward a more nuanced connection between servant leadership and Christian thinking.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership, servant leadership, Christian leadership, leadership models

## INTRODUCTION

Servant leadership has developed into one of the most visible approaches to leadership in organizations. Organizations as diverse as Southwest Airlines, Herman Miller, Synovus Financial, WD-40 Company, Food for the Hungry, and the U. S. Military are known to advocate and attempt to practice servant leadership. Some organizations seem to be better at it than others, and certainly some that claim to practice servant leadership may leave the observer wondering if the organization actually understands what it means.

While many of the organizations that practice servant leadership are distinctly secular, the concept has often been identified with Christian thought. Authors like Blanchard and Hodges (2005), Beckett (1998), and Hunter (2004) have explicitly tied servant leadership to the example of Jesus. The connection seems obvious given the emphasis that Jesus placed on service during his ministry. In passages like Matthew 20:20-28, Luke 22:24-27, and John 13:1-17, Jesus clearly prioritizes service as a mark of his followers. Paul also uses Jesus as an example of perfect service in Philippians 2:5-11. While these passages clearly emphasize service, some have questioned whether the commitment to service necessarily ties into servant leadership.

In a provocative article, Locke (2019) suggests that the modern servant leadership movement is more grounded in eastern thinking than in Christianity and that Christians should be careful about directly associating servant leadership with Christian thought or practice, and especially with the example of Jesus. Authors like Beadles II (2000), Babyak (2018) and Niewold (2007)

have also questioned whether Christians should consider servant leadership to be directly connected to Jesus and Christian thinking.

Caplinger and Gerdes (2021) did a comparison of various leadership theories to Jesus' example. They considered approaches to leadership like servant leadership, authentic leadership, transformative leadership, and charismatic leadership. What was notable in their presentation was that while there was overlap between each of the perspectives and Jesus's practice of leadership, none of them were a perfect fit. This writer's primary takeaway from the presentation was the impression that no human developed perspective of leadership appears to be sufficient to encompass the life and work of Jesus. From a Christian perspective, that is not surprising. Jesus is both God and man. Human-based systems are not going to fully encapsulate him. However, that does not necessarily mean that an approach like servant leadership is not a good standard of practice for Christians who lead.

While there may be elements of Jesus's behavior and practice that do not fit perfectly with applications of leadership approaches, part of the reason for that may be his dual nature as both God and man. The argument in this paper is that servant leadership does represent a perspective on leadership that is most consistent with the teachings of scripture. The core idea of servant leadership—that the leader is “servant first”—is perfectly compatible with Jesus's view that his followers should be “servants first.”

The plan of this paper is to first consider some of the problems that may be raised by the difficulty of determining an exact definition of servant leadership.

Next the author will address some of the rejections of servant leadership and the reasoning behind them. The author will then consider valid concerns that come from the critiques and some of the more problematic elements of those critiques. This analysis will be followed by a brief discussion of what might be a biblical perspective on leadership. Finally, the author will address how a biblical perspective of servant leadership might differ from some of the modern understandings.

## DEFINING SERVANT LEADERSHIP

One problem that becomes apparent when considering this debate is the lack of a clear definition of servant leadership. The early explanations of what servant leadership means tend to be vague. Greenleaf (1970) emphasizes that the servant leader is servant first. He presents some character elements that make that possible, such as openness, acceptance, empathy, and perception. He also notes a couple of critical skills like listening and the foresight to develop a vision or goal. Greenleaf seems to have wanted to minimize the specifics so that the core idea of service-first would not get lost in the details. Those who are closest to following Greenleaf (especially those who have been part of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership) have tended to also keep a very limited definition of servant leadership. Keith (2008), for instance, identifies a small set of practices such as being self-aware, listening, developing colleagues, coaching, having foresight, and unleashing the energy of others. Most of these closely parallel Greenleaf's ideas. Keith does add the notion of "turning the pyramid upside down" that has become a popular picture of what servant leadership means in organizations.

Other writers have included more specifics about what it means to be a servant leader. Often, those writers seem to be bringing in leadership concepts from other sources that do seem to fit with the servant leadership model. This tends to make servant leadership more practical and specific but also raises some questions about what practices really are part of servant leadership. Autry (2001) attempts to set the mundane experiences of day-to-day management (job descriptions, performance standards, performance appraisals, etc.) in the context of loving and serving employees. Blanchard and Hodges (2005) talk about turning the pyramid upside down and also bring in Christian spiritual practices such as prayer,

solitude, scripture reading, unconditional love, and mutual accountability. Hunter (2004) also emphasizes the upside-down pyramid but includes ideas about accountability and motivation that are concerned about developing the whole person.

These examples point to a bit of the difficulty in evaluating servant leadership. Some of the proponents of the approach are intentionally vague. On the other hand, those who do present specific ideas do not always present the same ideas. This issue can make it difficult to evaluate whether or not someone is actually practicing servant leadership. If leaders are only doing some of the things mentioned by various proponents, are they actually practicing servant leadership?

The absolutely essential element of servant leadership is the idea that the leader is servant first. There are two elements to that service. Effective leaders must serve the organization and its mission. They must also serve their followers. Those two elements are not in conflict. If leaders are not serving the mission of the organization, they are not helping their followers grow into all they can be in the organization. Part of the strength of servant leadership has been that if people know that a leader cares about them as individuals, they tend to be more engaged and more productive. Servant leaders seek to influence people by serving their developmental needs.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) offer one other idea that may help in considering the relationship of servant leadership to Jesus's teaching. They emphasize the idea of "practicing leadership" rather than the idea of "being a leader." Their point is that leadership is not about position but about creating change. While Heifetz and Linsky are not direct advocates of servant leadership, they provide a distinction that can be helpful. The goal is not to acquire a position; the goal is to provide direction to a better future. That distinction will prove helpful in connecting leadership to what Jesus had to say about service.

## CRITIQUES OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

There are two types of concerns raised about servant leadership. The key concerns for this paper are those that question whether servant leadership fits with Christian thinking. The other concerns, which will be addressed first, but briefly, relate to whether servant leadership calls for leaders to put the needs of followers over the needs of the organization.

### Are Servant Leaders Soft Leaders?

Babyak (2018) and Beadles II (2000) both suggest that servant leadership places too much emphasis on the needs of the follower. Beadles II (2000) argues that a servant leader does not exercise authority or, at least, only exercises it sparingly. Beadles contrasts that perspective with Jesus, who clearly did exercise authority regularly. Babyak (2018) argues that servant leadership places the interests of the followers not only the leader's needs but even those of the organization. As has already been noted in the previous section, this appears to be a misconstruction of servant leadership. Blanchard (2005) and Hunter (2004) both note that it is possible to be a servant leader and an authoritative leader, especially in terms of holding firm to the mission and values of the organization. While servant leaders care about growing followers as individuals, a significant part of the goal of that growth is developing the followers as contributors to the organization. Hunter (2004) suggests this can involve disciplinary action. He goes so far as to quote Richard Green, the CEO of Blistex, as saying "It is immoral not to fire those who can't do the job" (as cited in Hunter, 2004, pp. 119-120).

Even Greenleaf's (1970) understanding of servant leadership is not about just doing what other people want. Greenleaf's test of effective leadership involves having followers grow as individuals. Leadership is only successful if followers are becoming "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 15). For that growth to happen, Greenleaf sees that the servant leader must "sometimes refuse to accept some of the person's effort or performance as good enough" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 21). The goal of serving is to lift people up so that they can accomplish what is needed. Servant leaders cannot effectively serve the needs of the individual unless they are first serving the mission. The U.S. military provides a textbook example of that understanding of servant leadership. The mission has to come first in military planning, yet the branches of the armed forces believe that the mission is best met when groups are led by those who begin by serving.

### Does Servant Leadership Fit with Christian Thinking?

Christian business practitioners and faculty are also concerned about whether or not a practice like servant leadership is a fit for people of faith. Several concerns have been raised about the legitimacy of servant leadership as a Christian concept. In this section, the objections will be noted. In the next section of the paper, the strengths and weaknesses of those objections will be addressed.

Beadles II (2000) argues that servant leadership is not a distinctly Christian perspective. He argues the theory can be accepted and practiced by Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and atheists. Since there is nothing in Christian statements of servant leadership that would give even an atheist concerns about practicing it, servant leadership should not be considered a distinctly biblical perspective.

Locke (2019) raises three key issues that create concerns about servant leadership as a Christian perspective. First, servant leadership is not grounded in Christian thinking. The modern servant leadership movement began with Robert Greenleaf's (1970) essay "The Servant as Leader." Greenleaf uses examples from eastern mysticism to illustrate his perspective on what leadership means. While he occasionally references Jesus, it is never as an authoritative source.

Second, Locke (2019) argues that the concept of servant leadership is possibly a misreading of Jesus's teaching. Those who connect servant leadership to Jesus's teaching generally use Matthew 20: 25-28 and Luke 22:24-27 as evidence that Jesus taught that "those who want to be great" must serve. Locke contends that there is adequate biblical scholarship that would suggest that Jesus is not talking about leadership at all in these passages. Jesus is simply defining that "greatness" in the kingdom of God is defined by serving. It is not clear that Jesus means greatness in any sense of leadership positions.

Third, Locke (2019) suggests that Jesus does not make a good example of servant leadership. Jesus puts the needs of his mission above the needs of his disciples. Jesus seldom does anything that even looks like participative leadership. He is actually rather autocratic about pursuing the mission and even rebukes many of the disciples' suggestions about how he should go about his ministry (Mark 8:33, for example). Contrary to the servant leadership role of establishing a mission and vision, Locke sees Jesus as following the Father's vision and giving the disciples a less-than-complete picture of where his ministry was headed. Finally, in contrast to the idea that a servant leader's power comes from followers, Jesus's power was not dependent on any other human beings.

### EVALUATING THE ARGUMENTS

Are these concerns about connecting servant leadership to Christian practice warranted? Two of the issues raise some significant concerns about that connection. Two of them seem more problematic in their application to

the argument. In the next section, the more significant concerns will be addressed. Then the following section will consider the ones that seem easier to challenge.

### **Valid Concerns Raised**

Two of the concerns Locke (2019) raises about the modern servant leadership movement do raise questions about trying to connect servant leadership to Christian thinking. Locke is correct that the modern servant leadership movement did not arise from biblical exegesis or Christian theological reasoning. It is also true that Jesus is not a perfect model of servant leadership. There is also some validity to his concerns about how Matthew 20:25-28 and Luke 22:24-27 are interpreted, though he may have carried that argument a bit further than it has legs to go.

Greenleaf's (1970) argument for servant leadership clearly does not come from biblical exegesis. Greenleaf uses eastern writings as his early examples to describe servant leadership. He does not seem to treat Scripture as authoritative. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership takes an ecumenical perspective with its presentations on servant leadership. Their conferences on servant leadership often have presenters from many different religious traditions. On the other hand, there have been some Christian writers who have developed servant leadership arguments that are more grounded in Scripture. Blanchard and Hodges (2005), Bucci and Lewis (2016), Miller (1995), Becket (1998), and Hunter (2004) all point to scriptural principles to argue for servant leadership. Nevertheless, the variations in sources should give Christians looking for an approach to leadership pause in accepting something as "leading biblically" just because it comes from an advocate of servant leadership.

Did Jesus actually practice servant leadership? If Christians are called to be "imitators of Christ," then does that mean that Christians should practice servant leadership? As Locke (2019) points out, there are certainly examples where Jesus does not fit some of the elements associated with servant leadership. Certainly, Jesus did not use a participative approach to leadership. He does not ask the disciples what they think he should do in a particular situation. In fact, he is more likely to reject their suggestions when made (Matthew 16:23; John 9:1-3). When Jesus sends out the twelve on a mission, he gives them very specific directions and does not leave much flexibility for them to make their own decisions (Matthew 10:5-15). It is clear that there are at least some instances of ideas that are often associated with servant leadership that were not part of how Jesus practiced leadership.

This returns the discussion to the note about Caplinger and Gerdes (2021) from the introduction. Trying to encapsulate Jesus's behavior in one system is asking too much. There are several things that should be noted here, however. First, Jesus did practice a "servant first" approach to all of life, including how he led his followers. Jesus used himself as an example of service in John 13. Paul describes Jesus as "taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil 2: 7). Thus, his example does fit the core element of servant leadership. Second, while Jesus is a moral example for his followers, it is not really possible for Christians to follow everything in his example. The most extreme example would be that Christians cannot die for the sins of the world. Also, none of Jesus's followers have ever been able to work miracles at the level that he did. In terms of leadership, Jesus had a perfect understanding of his mission and the way to reach it that ordinary human beings do not have. He was also following a mission that the disciples could not really understand. Participative leadership would have made no sense in his context. More ordinary leaders may be best served, however, by looking for ideas from a broad array of followers rather than charging forward because they think they know the answer. Third, Locke's point about Jesus as an "imperfect" example of servant leadership should be taken seriously. It is overstepping good biblical exegesis to try to equate "leading like Jesus" with everything that is argued for in modern servant leadership.

### **Problems in the Argument**

Two of the arguments leading to a disconnect between servant leadership and Christian thinking are more problematic. The argument that servant leadership is not distinctly Christian puts too much emphasis on whether or not non-Christians might accept the idea. The more serious question concerns the application of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 20 and Luke 22.

Beadles II (2000) argued that servant leadership is not distinctly biblical. The author notes that the theory can be accepted and practiced by "Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and atheists alike" (Beadles II, 2000, p. 30). There is nothing in the theory that would cause someone who rejects biblical authority to reject it. The problem with this argument is that it ignores the principle that is summed up in the phrase "all truth is God's truth." The question is not if a perspective is "distinctly" biblical. The question is if a perspective is "principally" biblical. For instance, many religious and non-religious people would agree that humility is an important virtue. That

does not mean that humility is not a critical Christian virtue. It is, in fact, the very first thing Jesus references in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3). The Sermon on the Mount concludes with the idea that the wise person will practice Jesus's teaching and the foolish person will not (Matthew 7:24-29).

So, is the concept of servant leadership "principally" biblical? Does an evaluation of the text in Matthew 20 and Luke 22 yield an argument for servant leadership? Certainly, that has been an interpretation of the text. Mounce (1991) sees the willingness to be a servant as the starting point of being an effective leader. Barton et. al. (1996) argue that the "true leader" places his or her needs last by being a servant to all. Strong (2017) suggests that leaders in the kingdom of God are not leaders who happen to serve; they are servants who also happen to lead. These authors connect Jesus's reference to "greatness" in the kingdom to leadership.

Locke (2019), on the other hand, argues that Jesus is redefining greatness rather than redefining leadership. Citing both ancient and modern scholars, he notes that there is, at a minimum, a reasonable argument that Jesus's reference to greatness is about what is impressive rather than about position. Jesus might be better understood to be teaching his followers the way to be impressive in the kingdom is by serving rather than saying anything about leadership. Locke notes that the word translated greatness can have several meanings, including extraordinary size, impressive attributes, or rank. Locke argues that the core idea Jesus is trying to teach the disciples is that they are to serve. Jesus is not giving a path to positions of leadership.

Locke's argument that the text is not necessarily talking about leadership is reasonable. While many scholars interpret these passages, along with John 13, as Jesus describing what a Christian leader should look like, those passages do not speak specifically about leadership. It should be noted, though, that Peter seems to have interpreted Jesus's teaching as connected to leadership. In his instructions to Christian elders in I Peter 5, he calls on them to serve out of a willing heart, to set an example rather than "lording it over those entrusted to you" and to shepherd and care for the church. Locke's contrast seems to be between greatness as impressiveness and greatness as a leadership position. This is where Heifetz and Linsky (2002) can be helpful. The key issue is not seeking a leadership position; that seems to be exactly what Jesus was objecting to with James and John. Instead, leadership helps to move people from where they are to where they need to be, without particular concern for rank. That

role is clearly a part of the Christian mission and is often described in the New Testament. The Great Commission is to make disciples, which involves leading people who do not know Christ to understand what a relationship with Christ looks like. While the Church has sometimes focused more on conversions than discipleship, the pattern of New Testament discipleship is an investment in developing people. The twelve served in the role of Apostles, helping the new church understand what discipleship looks like. The various churches had individuals who offered leadership and guidance to the local congregations. The three passages discussed here, though, give a clear message to all those who are doing those kinds of things: The disciple of Jesus is "servant first."

If the Christian disciple is called to be "servant first" and the servant leader is called to be "servant first," then, in terms of leadership, servant leadership is the only game in town for the follower of Christ. Therefore, while Locke is right that the Matthew and Luke texts do not necessarily talk about leadership, a Christian disciple cannot approach leadership in any other way than service since Christians are committed to service in all of their actions.

### IS THERE A BIBLICAL VIEW OF LEADERSHIP?

One of the difficulties in trying to define a biblical view of leadership is that much of Scripture is more narrative than didactic in nature. Often stories appear in the text that describe something that happened without giving any clear indication about what the right choice in the situation was. For instance, Exodus 18 tells the story of Jethro coming to visit Moses. Jethro sees Moses trying to do almost everything himself and encourages him to appoint a series of lower-level judges to handle smaller issues. Does this text reflect Moses learning the value of delegation and empowerment, or is it Moses accepting the advice of a pagan priest to create a bureaucratic distance between him and the people? It is likely that the assumptions about leadership one brings to the text are going to figure into how one interprets it. Kessler (2013) argues that cultural influences and assumptions will often influence how interpreters read the text, which seems especially true in cases where the text is telling a story without comment about God's perspective. While Kessler's warning deserves to be taken seriously, there are some themes that seem to develop in scripture.

A key starting point in the biblical picture is the leadership that God provides to the world in general and for

God's people specifically. Cincala (2016), Ruffner and Huizing (2016), and Patterson (2016) all see the trinitarian nature of God as a key element of God's leadership. The mutual submission of the trinity provides a model for the behavior of those attempting to lead (Ruffner & Huizing, 2016). Cincala (2016) notes the relational nature of God's leadership. The various members of the trinity work in relation to each other, and then God works with people through the building of relationships. While God is seen as the leader of the people, it should be noted that other leaders are also important in the Old Testament. Patterson (2017) describes the leadership system as distributed. Elders, Levites, priests, prophets, judges, kings, and even a royal governor (Nehemiah) all play leadership roles at various times. Some of the leadership roles were clearly divided. Saul loses his kingdom because he performs a religious act that was reserved for Samuel's spiritual authority (I Samuel 13).

God is seen as the key leader of the people in the Old Testament; he is often described as the shepherd who cares for the people (Crowther, 2018). At least eight different Hebrew verbs have at least one meaning of "to lead." Most references to leading in the Old Testament refer to God as "the one who leads" (Davidson, 2014). Davidson (2014) notes that it is not as common for people, but there are references where Moses is being told to lead the people out of Egypt (Exodus 32:34), Moses appoints Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land (Numbers 17:18-23), and David is described as "leading the people" (Psalm 78:72). The concept of servanthood is also used often in the Old Testament, often paradoxically in reference to those also described as leaders. Davidson (2014) notes that 35 named individual leaders across the full range of the Old Testament are described as servants.

One example of combining an ideal of service and leadership in the Old Testament occurs in I Kings 12. Rehoboam is trying to determine how to act as king. The elder statesmen tell him to "be a servant of these people and serve them" (12:7). However, the younger advisers tell him to promise an even heavier yoke than Solomon's (12:10-11). Rehoboam unwisely chooses to follow the advice of the younger men and pays for it with the loss of 5/6 of his kingdom. While much of the service of the Old Testament is directed toward God, this passage shows a clear example of the leader being asked to also serve the people (Davidson, 2014).

In the New Testament, service remains a key element. Jesus is described as "taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). He illustrates serving as a key behavior

even for the Master in John 13. Paul routinely describes himself as both an apostle and a servant, though usually only uses one of those designations at the beginning of each of his letters. Crowther (2018) notes that Barnabas is a leader in the church before Saul's conversion, but he chooses to help Paul to develop and become the more significant member of their mission team. He also helps to develop John Mark, who also goes on to a greater place in the church. Peter calls on church leaders to serve those who were entrusted into their care (I Peter 5:1-5).

The Scripture seems to tie service and leadership together. Yet, it is important not to forget Kessler's (2013) warning about the danger of carrying cultural influences back into the interpretation of scripture. Kessler notes, for instance, that Russian cultures tend to see leadership in autocratic terms and tend to emphasize verses like Hebrews 13: 17 that say "obey your leaders." On the other hand, Americans tend to see leadership in more democratic terms and might tend to emphasize Paul's discussions of encouragement and empowerment. The point here is that the interpreter must recognize that the cultural baggage is there and work to minimize it as much as possible.

## MOVING FORWARD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP

One of the things that has sometimes frustrated this writer about the servant leadership movement is the vagueness that often surrounds the concept. Writers like Greenleaf and those who have followed his example tend to avoid specifics about how the practice should work. Instead, they focus on the general idea of "servant first" and some general character traits that fit with that idea (Greenleaf, 1970; Keith, 2008; Spears, 1998). While Jesus's teaching does line up with the idea of service as a priority, perhaps Christians should be careful about uncritically accepting some of the specifics that are connected to servant leadership as being just as biblically grounded.

Locke's (2019) conclusions discourage a connection between servant leadership and Christianity. He argues that it is unclear that Jesus calls us to lead, but that it is clear that he calls us to serve. He also notes that some who profess servant leadership may be simply attempting to "baptize" their own ambitions by connecting them to Jesus. His warning against uncritical acceptance of ideas tied to servant leadership is worth observing. However, some of his conclusions seem to be a step too far.

While Jesus may not fit neatly into any one leadership model, he certainly practiced leadership on a regular basis. He began his ministry by going to individual men and saying “follow me” (Matthew 4:18-22; Matthew 9:9; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:33-50). He sent the disciples out on missions where he gave them specific direction about how to act (Matthew 10: 1-15; Luke 10: 1-12). At the close of his ministry, he set forward a mission that would dominate not only the rest of the disciples’ lives but also the history of the church in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). That commission also does require some elements of leadership from his disciples. The church is called to influence people to choose to become disciples of Christ and to develop into effective disciples; Christians have a responsibility to help people move from being isolated from God into a close relationship with God. Influence and change are generally defined as the core of any form of leadership (Daft, 2018; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

It is also true that there might be those who will seek to use claims of servant leadership to “baptize” their own ambitions. However, that is also true of almost every kind of Christian virtue. Individuals might do a bit of “humble brag” for instance to claim humility while explaining why people should see them as special. Some might claim to be seeking unity by excluding those who are opposed to their ideas. Certainly, love is a clear Christian virtue, yet it is often misused to justify a variety of unsavory behaviors. It is doubtful that there are any virtues that cannot be distorted. That is what makes the character of the actor so important.

Perhaps from a Christian perspective, the lack of specifics in defining servant leadership is a good thing. The core idea that the leader is “servant first” is clearly consistent with Jesus’s teaching. Virtues like humility, empathy, and stewardship easily fit within the Christian perspective as well. That is the best understanding of a solid foundation for servant leadership. Other specific details of best approaches to leadership may come best from the study of both how well the practices work and how they affect others. Rather than uncritically accepting any idea claimed to be part of servant leadership, Christians should “test the spirits” to see if the practice fits with the broad biblical message.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than seeing servant leadership as having a poor foundation (clay feet), it is better to see it as a

perspective that needs careful cultivation. All Christians are called to serve. That is a strong foundation. How that service is connected to leadership may require delicate gardening. Locke (2019) is right that not every idea connected to servant leadership in the literature should be uncritically accepted by believers. On the other hand, when those ideas are tested both in terms of their effectiveness and their consistency with biblical truth, they can be carefully integrated into a whole picture of the best approaches to leading.

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