Revisiting site manager work: stuck in the middle?

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The literature on middle managers tends to portray their role in rather negative terms. Middle managers are here stuck in between superiors and subordinates, with few opportunities for determining their work situation. In the construction industry, site managers play a role similar to that of the middle managers of large companies, located in between the firm's strategic decisions and day-to-day production work on construction sites. The aim of this study is to examine how site managers experience their work situation. Drawing on an interview study encompassing 13 site managers and seven foremen and top managers in 13 construction projects, the research suggests that site managers are generally pleased with their work situation even though they are critical of the demands made of them to handle a variety of heterogeneous activities. However, a work situation fraught with unanticipated challenges and ambiguities easily leads to excessive workloads and long working hours. It is concluded that the literature on middle managers presents too negative an image of middle management and thus needs to revise the assumptions regarding the nature of middle managerial work. In addition, the study also underlines the needs of construction firms to regard their middle managers as a central function and resource.

Keywords: Site managers, construction projects, middle managers

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore how middle managers in the construction industry conceive of their work life situation and to point out some of the major challenges that site managers are grappling with in their day-to-day work. The point of departure for this study is the negative view of middle management in much management literature. Research on middle managers remains one of the most marginalised fields of interest in management studies (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Floyd and Woolridge, 1997). In comparison to the massive amount of literature on leadership, the body of texts on the middle manager group is miniscule. Moreover, in comparison with the so-called labour process studies tradition, emphasising the worker's position and everyday work life experiences, the middle manager is a marginal figure and one who in many cases embodies all the practices, ideologies and beliefs that his or her co-workers resist and struggle with. In cases where middle management is actually examined, it is portrayed in the bleakest of terms. Middle managers are here on the way out, continuously being reduced in number when organisations adopt a flatter structure; they are stressed and burned out; they experience a work life situation wherein they are stuck between the demands of top management and their co-workers and subordinates (Dopson and Stewart, 1990). In the construction industry, it is site managers at construction sites who play the most important middle management role. For instance, Mustapha and Naoum (1998, p. 1) write: 'The site manager stands at the heart of the success or the failure of the project for the contractor, the professional team, the client and ultimately the general public'. Site managers thus have a work role that requires the ability to combine a variety of heterogeneous activities, both practical and administrative, and as regards demanding a significant workload from the site manager in question. Studies of site managers suggest that they experience their work life as problematic in terms of needing to juggle a multiplicity

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of activities and because they have to perform a work role wherein it is essentially problematic to predict forthcoming events and occurrences (Mustapha and Naoum, 1998; Davidson and Sutherland, 1992). By and large, site manager work implies navigating in a work situation fraught with ambiguities and emerging and unpredictable events and occurrences. This paper presents a study of how Swedish site managers view their positions between, on the one hand, the demands of top management and the expectations regarding financial performance and smoothly functioning project management activities, and, on the other, the co-workers of the projects. The study suggests that, rather than seeing middle managers and site managers as an overtly disfavoured group, unable to establish a work situation wherein they can mediate the expectations of different stakeholders and colleagues, one must recognise the demands for professional skills and work life experiences required in order to be capable of operating in the role of site manager. In other words, site managers' work needs to be examined in more positive terms than is generally suggested in both the site manager literature and management writing which addresses the role of middle management.

Middle managers and site managers

In what follows, there are two different strands of research that need to be attended to. First, there is a literary corpus addressing middle managers in large hierarchical organisations. Secondly, there are a number of publications discussing the role of site managers in construction projects. The 'general middle management literature' tends to focus on more conventional organisations and firms than construction companies which, of necessity, have developed their own rather idiosyncratic type of middle manager: the site manager. Conversely, the site manager literature does not regularly make references to the management literature derived from studies of companies outside the construction industry. This distinction between the construction industry and other industries is problematic because it presents the construction industry as something which is naturally distinguished from other organisational activities. When bridging the two traditions of research, one may present a more integrated and complex picture of how middle management work is constituted in organisations.

Dopson and Stewart (1990) point to the rather negative image of the middle manager's position within the firm:

> Few people have anything encouraging so say about middle management … most people portray the middle

managers as a frustrated, disillusioned individual caught in the middle of a hierarchy impotent and with no real hope of career progression. The work is dreary, the careers are frustrating and information technology, some writers argue, will make the role yet more routine, uninteresting and unimportant. (Dopson and Stewart, 1990, p. 3)

For some reason, such negative accounts of middle management work predominate in the literature. For instance, Linstead and Thomas (2002, p. 3) make reference to one of their own studies:

> Thomas & Linstead's (2002) critique of existing research on the 'state' of middle management suggested that middle managers are reduced to little more than structurally and environmentally determined phenomena in this literature … Managers are portrayed as univocal and homogeneous entities that are passive victims rather than active agents constructing, resisting and challenging the subjectivities offered them.

For Linstead and Thomas (2002), middle managers are often envisaged as agents who have neither the capacity nor the mandate to actively influence the tactical and strategic decision-making processes of the firm. Instead, they are assigned an intermediary role in between the 'thinking' (top management) and the 'doing' (subordinate workers). However, there are examples of how middle management is portrayed in more affirmative terms. King *et al.* (2001) argue that middle managers play a central role in implementing strategic decisions on the shop floor and that middle management very much remains an untapped reserve within firms:

> Middle managers play an essential, but often unappreciated, role in successful strategy making. Middle managers' participation in strategy formulation is associated with improved firm performances, and their commitment is critical to successful strategy implementation. (King *et al.*, 2001, p. 98)

In a similar vein, Delmestri and Walgenbach (2005) argue, on the basis of research into middle management work conducted in the UK, Italy and Germany, that middle managers play the role either of knowledge broker (as is the case in the UK) or of technical experts capable of dealing with practical problem solving. In the three cases, middle managers thought of themselves as gatekeepers *vis-à-vis* top management; i.e. they were the ones dealing with small, day-to-day concerns, thereby preventing them from moving up the hierarchy, thereby stealing valuable time from top management. Other writers such as Nonaka and Takeushi (1995), drawing on a Japanese management model emphasising middle management as something which is of central importance to firm performance, suggest a

'middle-up-down' strategy whereby middle managers, who have detailed control but are capable of seeing the broader picture, should have a say in the strategy formulation process. Similarly, Huy (2002) argues that middle managers are capable of dealing with emotional responses among their co-workers during organisation change projects and thus play a central role in change management activities. In summary, middle managers are relatively marginalised in terms of research interests and are portrayed, in many cases, in unnecessarily critical terms. However, they are in some cases examined as a central group for firm performance and the implementation of strategic decisions.

The literature addressing site managers in the construction industry is almost as negatively slanted. Again, site managers are portrayed as a professional group exposed to conflicting demands and objectives, operating in a complicated work situation. For instance, Djerbarni (1996) writes:

> Site managers carry out one of the toughest and hardest jobs in the construction process. Site management is characterised by a high work overload, long working hours, and many conflicting parties to deal with including the management, the subcontractors, the subordinates, the client, etc. This trait of the job makes it very prone to stress. (Djerbarni, 1996, p. 281)

Djerbarni (1996) examines how stress influences the work of site managers and suggests that the exposure to stress during site manager work remains one of the main challenges facing the industry. In another study, Davidson and Sutherland (1992, p. 33) claim that site managers in the construction industry are more exposed to stressors than managers in other industries: 'Levels of reported job satisfaction were significantly lower for managers in the construction industry than among managers and supervisory grades employed in engineering'. Among the most important stressors were 'time pressure' and 'working long hours'. Davidson and Sutherland (1992) point to the amount of 'paperwork' as one of the most important sources of stress. Mustapha and Naoum (1998) examined the factors determining site manager effectiveness and found that personal qualities and job conditions, e.g. job satisfaction, are the two most important factors. Effective site managers are then primarily high performers because of their individual skills. Fraser's (2000) study of the site manager's work supports this emphasis on personal characteristics and suggests that these strongly affect the performance of construction projects. Fraser thus sides with a number of leadership studies emphasising the charismatic element of all leadership work (Flynn and Staw, 2003; Ball and Carter, 2002; Steyrer, 1998). However, the image of the site manager's work situation sketched by Djerbarni (1996), Davidson and Sutherland (1992) and Fraser (2000) largely supports the findings of studies of leadership work in other settings. Ethnographic accounts of leadership presented in Carlsson's (1951) seminal study and later reproduced by Mintzberg (1973) testify to a most fragmented working day, based on numerous brief interactions with co-workers and continuously interrupted by minor issues needing attention. However, it is worth taking some of the specific characteristics of site manager work into account. First, the site manager is responsible not only for technical and production-oriented matters on the construction site, but also has to be trained in administrative work, legal matters, human resource management and some other activities generally functionally organised into different departments and work roles at firms. The site manager thus needs, to a greater extent, everything else equal, to be the jack-of-all-trades than is the case for corresponding middle managers in other industries. Several studies of construction work suggest that experiential learning is one of the most central learning strategies within the industry (see, for instance, Love *et al.*, 2000; Lowe and Skitmore, 1994; Ogulana, 1991). This goes for site managers as well whose work demands significant experience of the construction industry. Secondly, site managers often work on their own with few, if any, colleagues in close proximity. Therefore, site managers have fewer opportunities for collaborating with their peers. Because of the demands to master a multiplicity of processes and activities, and a work situation with few colleagues, a site manager is likely to experience his or (to a minor extent) her situation as being stuck in between not only the expectations of top management and construction workers, but also between conflicting priorities, objectives and goals. However, in order to understand how site managers conceive of their role and their work life opportunities, systematic studies of how they cope with this highly demanding work situation are very much required. Rather than adhering to positivist and qualitative methods (see, for instance, Mustapha and Naoum, 1998; Djerbarni, 1996; Davidson and Sutherland, 1992), qualitative methodologies (e.g. interviews) may shed further light on site managers' work life experiences. In what follows, a number of site managers account for their work as the muddling through of a series of heterogeneous activities constituting day-to-day work in construction projects. Being able to navigate in such complex domains was regarded as the primary expertise of the site manager, and such skills and experiences were highly prized by site managers. In addition, they thought of these skills as being of central importance to the skilful mastery of their work and to the performance of the construction project.

Methodology

The study forms part of a broader study of site managers' work situations and the opportunities for on-the-job training. The study was based on a qualitative methodology, and more specifically, on interviews with 13 site managers, one line manager and six foremen at 13 different construction sites. Each site manager represented one ongoing construction site during the winter and spring of 2005. The study is thus based on what is known as a 'small sample' (see March *et al.*, 1991). Consequently, no claims are made in the paper that the findings reported upon objectively represent site managers' work in general. However, a small sample research design enables detailed insight into the work life of individuals whose work assignments are structured in accordance with standard operating procedures and work routines. Such work routines are in many cases shared between firms and industries. As regards site managers, there is reason to believe that the work situation of the interviewed site managers and their colleagues is not radically different from the work of site managers elsewhere. Some of the interviewees had work life experiences from other companies and other countries, arguing that the work was, *mutatis mutandis*, very much the same as in their present positions. Therefore, small samples are not of necessity a limitation for the study.

Even though interviewing is one of the most widely applied methodologies in the social sciences, it remains contested in terms of resting on frail epistemological grounds (Alvesson, 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 2003; Briggs, 2003). For instance, it may be complicated to separate what Argyris and Schön (1978) call *espoused theories* from *theories in use*, i.e. practices and methods that are formally acknowledged versus practices and methods that are actually employed. Interviewees may then choose to present one image of themselves in an interview situation that does not fully correspond to real work life activities. Therefore, interview statements cannot, to use Atkinson and Coffrey's (2003, p. 117) formulation, be taken 'as a proxy for action': people may say one thing and do another.

The interviews lasted for about one hour and 15 minutes on average. A semi-structured interview guide was used. The site managers represented one major Swedish construction company and one medium-sized, but growing, construction company. All projects being managed by site managers were major new construction projects and the site managers had significant organisational tenure. Many of the site managers had spent all their working lives in the construction industry. Two of the interviewees held university degrees in construction engineering and management. All interviews were conducted on site, in the site managers' offices. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researchers and then individually coded (see Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Site managers in construction projects

Day-to-day work practices

All of the site managers appreciated their jobs and the freedom entailed by the work role. The site managers pointed to the creative part of their work, that they actually contributed to the construction of a real building. One of the site managers argued: 'What's most positive is that from this very blueprint and a time line, you see something growing out there—a physical effect. I consider that very rewarding' (Site manager #4). The site managers also pointed to the need for being at the centre of operations. One site manager argued: 'I, in my role as site manager, need to know what is going on at the site … I coordinate and thus I need to know what everybody's doing' (Site manager, #3). Another site manager said: 'The site manager is the hub around which everything revolves' (Site manager, #4). Thus, there were great demands on the site manager to forge good relationships with his or her co-workers. The site manager continued: 'I always spend time eating with the lads in the cabin. I try to maintain a good level of contact and good communication. I don't lock myself in my room to keep away from them' (Site manager, #3). The other site managers tended to agree on the importance of communicative capabilities:

> Q: How do you create trust in the workplace?
> A: I think you need to make it clear to the lads that they are needed.
> Q: And how do you do that?
> A: It depends on how you talk to them. You speak in a certain manner. 'Now, you do it like this', a bit like 'hierarchical orders' if you like—then you do not get the response you asked for. Instead, you say 'I need help to fix this and that, and I believe you can help me, OK?' and then he thinks that he's really making a difference. In the same way, if they are ill, they expect you to call them to ask how they are doing. That's very important. Especially for the lads who are ill quite often. They need to know whether there's somebody in the workplace who is responsible. (Site manager, #7)

Another site manager argued:

> I think you can go a long way if you are skilled in talking to people. You mustn't stay on you own and believe you know everything. There's always somebody who knows

better than you. As a site manager, you need—if not a safety net—then a number of people around you who you know you can call when things go wrong. That's very important. (Site manager, #4)

He continued:

A great deal of common sense is what you need; i.e. that you greet everyone, that you walk around and ask how people are and dedicate time to this, and then I think you'll gain a lot. If you're stressed out and they call you and say to you 'now, it's all gone pear-shaped' and then you run around, past 15 workers, and you don't even bother to say hello—very negative! That's really no good at all. (Site manager, #4)

In other words, the site manager needs to act as the leader of the site, not just as an administrator. This dual role of the site manager entails a significant workload for site managers. For instance, the number of meetings was occasionally seen to be a problem:

Q: Are there many meetings?
A: Well, it's outrageous! But it may be that it is extreme out here. They're [the client organisation's co-workers] crazy about meetings: you even have to prioritise what meetings to attend, otherwise you spend the whole day at meetings. (Site manager, #1)

In their day-to-day work life, site managers tended to think of their job as being both stressful and demanding. One of the site managers argued that stress was contingent and cyclical:

Q. Is it stressful?
A: Yes, you could say that. Now it's very cyclical, Some periods, you could say that you think of it as being on a normal level, that it's acceptable, but then there are periods when you really ask yourself what you're doing. (Site manager, #1)

One of the foremen, a former site manager, agreed: 'It is stressful. And you get the feeling that you never get a fair chance to finish anything. You could have like 10 different jobs going at the same time and you never finish them. In many cases, you have to use the nighttime for shovelling off things so you can start on the next assignment'. One site manager emphasised the tendency within the industry to favour the 'lean production' forms of organising new projects:

Construction projects are getting shorter and shorter, and that's a negative thing … the real estate companies are saving some money that way … you don't let a project team of four run a project like that a year in advance. Instead, you start the design work more or less at the same time as we start on the construction work. It is a really slim organisation these days. Especially in this type of contracting [total contracting]. (Site manager, #5)

One of the foremen added:

I believe it isn't that easy to please everyone. He [the site manager] is under pressure from the company to make everything run smoothly and we have to make some money on every project … Today, the time lines are so compressed that I believe he really needs to show a great deal of responsibility to find solutions in order to keep to schedule. (Foreman)

One site manager pointed to the work pressure as being on the verge of what was possible to handle: 'Today, with the degree of support I have here, there is no chance that I can take on any more work. I cannot even handle what I have as it is. We have pointed out that there is a need for more support' (Site manager, #3). He continued: 'You need to be able to cope with stress. You need to remain calm. The most important thing is that, even if it is stressful, you need to think that 'it cannot be that important' and then you need to take the time to think things through rather than doing something without thinking just because you think there's a panic' (Site manager, #3).

Administration versus production work

The primary source of the stress that caused negative consequences was the trade-off between different priorities; in most cases, production work versus administrative concerns. One of the site managers argued: 'You are always torn between production and administration. I think, after all, I enjoy a bit of both but what's demeaning is that you are always torn in two. Often, you do not have time to engage carefully with either of the two, but you make the two things equally mediocre' (Site manager, #1). As a consequence, there was a need to continually make priorities:

What I prioritise most of all is that construction work runs smoothly. If that works, we keep to the time schedule and everybody gets the chance to do their work. The admin is less prioritised. I'd rather take some complaints because of that than because of construction delays. Admin can always be dealt with afterwards. You need to deal with what's happening here and now. If that doesn't run as intended, you won't be able to catch up. (Site manager, #1)

This view was shared by all the site managers: 'The construction work [is prioritised]: to get a smooth and comfortable process at the site so you can do things in the right order and avoid panic situations. It's supposed to run smoothly and that's a matter of planning' (Site manager, #2); 'If I don't have the time, then I prioritise the construction work. If that doesn't work, the economics go with it' (Site manager, #3). One of the site managers thought of this new role of the site manager as being of rather recent origin:

The old site manager role, back then, was more about emphasising the management of the construction work. I know that back then, you didn't even see any invoices out there. Somebody else took care of them. What's happened over the years is that more and more admin has been decentralised but just as much management work [as previously] is still expected from you. This makes your work fragmented. (Site manager, #1)

This new site manager role entails, *inter alia*, a significant amount of paperwork being brought out to the construction sites from the central office. In the eyes of the site managers, this situation is problematic for two reasons. First, many competent potential site managers are not overtly attracted to the job of site manager because of its recent administrative outline. One of the site managers argued: 'A lot of people really do not want to deal with paperwork; they want to spend time on site. They may have the competence to construct buildings but not to take care of paperwork' (Site manager, #4). Secondly, the office space provided at construction sites did not offer the right conditions for doing paperwork. One of the site managers argued:

In a place like this, it is really hard to close the door and say you need to be on your own for a while because you have a protocol or some other things to take care of so you need a bit of peace. Then the phone rings, people come in to see you all the time. But after four o'clock, things calm down and you can gather your thoughts. (Site manager, #4)

Another site manager emphasised the need for a more modern view of the needs of site managers with regard to office space:

You live the life of a gipsy … These barracks are leased, and we change them all the time. I suggest we should have slightly more personalised offices which we bring with us from site to site. Then we'd be able to have an office; you know where your things are and you can keep it neat and tidy in a completely different way. (Site manager, #3)

The combination of the requirement to be capable of undertaking significant loads of administrative work and the lack of adequate working conditions was specifically cumbersome in smaller construction projects where there was little space for personalised offices. For some of the site managers, this was a major concern. But for others, its importance was less central. Another concern for site managers, in some cases, was that their superior line managers did not offer adequate support when this was requested. In most cases, this worked out without conflict. But in some cases, there were clashes of interest between the site managers and the objectives of the line managers: 'If it's my ambition

to take care of things in a certain way and be able to deal with my job assignments, then I get the response "you may need to lower your level of ambition. We cannot afford to work at that level"' (Site manager, #3). In other cases, line managers were regarded as being too involved in details in the site manager's territory: 'He [the line manager] doesn't really bother with the details … Some of them have been too involved in details and then you think that they should stay out of it' (Site manager, #1).

Concluding remarks

All in all, the work of the site manager was appreciated by the interviewees who also appreciated the 'creativity' of the work and the unpredictable nature of construction work. At the same time, conflicting interests bothered site managers in terms of imposing stressful work situations and the continual need for making decisions regarding which activities to prioritise at any given time. Even though the work of the site manager was regarded as something based on certain standard operating procedures, the interviewees emphasised the contingent nature of construction projects:

Q: What are desirable qualities in a site manager?
A: That's a tricky question. I think there can be rather different qualities depending on the project. If you work on you own in a small project, then you need to be really skilful in production matters, and preferably know all of it. If you are the site manager of a 100 million [in SEK] project, then it could be a catastrophe … there you need to motivate people and delegate tasks to the foremen … We've seen several cases where brilliant site managers are assigned a major project and then they stick to their routine and it all ends up in a crash because you cannot monitor everything in this case. (Site manager, #6)

One of the site managers concluded: 'One site manager differs from another. We're very different. I'm sure we work in a variety of ways. You mustn't believe that everyone is as you expect them to be' (Site manager, #4). The work of the site manager is portrayed here as series of hard-learned skills embedded in personal experiences. A diverse job demands diverse competencies, the site manager suggests.

Discussion

Contrary to the negative and somewhat gloomy portrayal of middle management in much of the management literature, the site managers in this study expressed their enthusiasm for their job. In addition, they also pointed to the site manager as having a very central role on the construction site and emphasised the

need for him or her to exert full control and authority over the construction project in question. However, the need to control such a large variety of heterogeneous activities put significant pressure on site managers. In many cases, this pressure entailed site managers being forced to prioritise between different objectives and operations. In most cases, the main source of conflict was between production and administration, whereby the former remains the main concern of site managers. Administrative activities were of less central importance to the role of site manager and were essentially regarded as that which is delegated to the construction site when construction firms are de-layering their structures. The role and position of the site manager thus both diverges from and converges with the position of the middle manager in other industries. First, middle managers are often portrayed in negative terms as something that is on its way out and playing an increasingly marginal role in firms (see, for instance, Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Floyd and Woolridge, 1997). Contrary to this view, site managers remain central players within the construction industry, embodying a set of skills and norms that are indispensable to the industry (see King *et al.*, 2001). Secondly, contrary to some middle managers' roles, site managers do not get a chance to become full-blown experts on any technology, but are instead expected to integrate a number of different skills and take charge of a series of activities which include leadership issues, technical expertise, administrative operations, planning and control procedures. The site manager is becoming here a jack-of-all-trades during the course of action. Some convergent themes are also observable. Middle managers tend, the literature suggests, to be on the losing side when firms outsource their activities and de-layer their structures. In a historical perspective, the role of site manager has broadened and deepened as administrative work activities become de-centralised to the project level. Without additional support and resources, this implies a significant increase in the pressure on site managers, as suggested by Djerbarni (1996) and Davidson and Sutherland (1992). Site managers have thus reported that they work about 25% more hours per week—about 50 hours rather than the average of 40—than prescribed. In addition, the site managers claimed they lacked the training, time and resources to handle these additional assignments. However, all in all, the middle management literature presents too negative an image of middle management work (e.g. site managers). Although the site managers expressed their concerns regarding the increased decentralisation of administrative work and a substantial workload, they were not representative of the archetypical, unmotivated and cynical middle managers stuck in the middle between a number of competing goals and expectations. Rather than portraying middle managers as a group, of necessity, deprived of meaningful work roles, one may take a more affirmative view of such managerial work. In the case of the site managers, it is evident that a certain degree of experience and skills is required in order to master such a complex role in construction projects. Therefore, one could speak of the job of site manager as being based on what Bourdieu (1990) calls a *habitus*, i.e. a specific set of integrated skills, experiences, behaviours and capabilities which make the agent capable of operating professionally within a specific field—in this case the construction industry. Becoming a skilful and professional site manager, then, is the outcome of long-term involvement in the industry.

In terms of practical implications, the study, albeit the empirical material, is arguably rather limited. It could be suggested that site managers are concerned about requirements to be able to manage a multiplicity of heterogeneous processes which include leadership work, administration, human resource management work, without being given proper training, resources or administrative support. Being able to establish new procedures whereby some of the most specialised work assignments are handled by administrative staff may further enhance the effectiveness of construction projects. In addition, it may be that the site managers of small construction projects need to receive extra attention because they are exposed to a significant workload and, at times, have few peers in their close proximity with whom they can discuss various concerns.

Conclusion

Middle managers belong to the least empirically studied groups of managers in organisations. This study suggests that the site managers—a specific type of middle manager in the construction industry—of construction projects do not experience their work situation as unilaterally negatively as is suggested in the middle management literature. On the contrary, the site managers interviewed expressed pride in their work and demonstrated long-term commitment to the industry. However, the experience of being stuck in between production objectives and day-to-day administrative routines has imposed an additional workload on site managers and caused some concerns. In conclusion, a more positive image of middle management is advocated while problems associated with the de-layering of organisations, e.g. the decentralisation of administrative work, are recognised.

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