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ABSTRACT

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General McPeak made sweeping changes to the Air Force during his tenure as Chief of Staff of the Air Force. This assessment analyzes his changes from a organizational cultural management perspective. The paper reviews the two dominant subcultures of the Air Force, Strategic Air Command and Tactical Air Command, and how General McPeak impacted these cultures to secure his vision for the future Air Force. The paper is fused with Edgar H. Schein's model for cultural analysis. Mr. Schein is a noted authority on organizational culture.

Introduction

Reeling from General Dugan's dismissal as the Chief of Staff of the Air Force in 1990, and confronting turbulent times, the Air Force turned to General Merrill McPeak to guide its course. This assessment will reveal the skillful manner in which General McPeak dealt with Air Force subcultures to secure his vision for a relevant Air Force for the future.

I will use Edgar H. Schein's model for assessing an organization's culture from his book Organizational Culture and Leadership. This paper focuses on the culture of the Air Force and its two dominant subcultures--Strategic Air Command and Tactical Air Command. It will detail the development of these subcultures and their impacts on General McPeak's vision. Finally, it will review the tools General McPeak chose for cultural change. The assessment fuses Schein's model of artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions along with Schein's articulated change mechanisms. The preponderance of the cultural assessment comes from my personal experience as a member of the Air Force culture for 17 years and Strategic Air Command for eight and Air Combat Command for two of those years.

To understand General McPeak's vision, it is important to understand his perception of the past and present Air Force, in particular, its cultural elements. He defined the service culture as "*...shared values and experiences, unspoken, even unacknowledged conclusions about the past, that give us our institutional identity. It is this culture that explains how we feel about things, how we really operate, that determines our*

present and future possibilities as an organization."[1] Coincidentally, while this is not verbatim with Schein's definition, it certainly has the same meaning. Schein defines culture as "*a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relations to those problems.*"[2]

General McPeak saw strategic bombing as the hidden context for the Air Force's institutional culture[3]. It was the basis for an independent service and the realization of the great air power theorists such as Dohet, Mitchell and company. This was the key cultural element that heavily influenced the Air Force in all that it did.

Strategic Air Command and Strategic Bombing

General McPeak saw Strategic Air Command (SAC) as the standard bearer of the strategic bombing cultural identity. From its inception in 1946 to its deactivation in 1992, SAC was devoted to strategic, long-range air combat operations.[4] SAC was the cultural carrier of strategic bombing as the key basic assumption of the Air Force.

The strategic nuclear bombing of Japan during WWII was the key event that cemented strategic bombing as a decisive means of employing air power. Strategic Air Command assumed primacy

within the Air Force mating long range bombers and nuclear bombs. With this, Strategic Air Command adopted a second key basic assumption defining its subculture--nuclear dependence.

Unfortunately, from the end of WWII to the present, strategic nuclear bombing, envisioned as a decisive strategy for employing air power, has not proven effective. General McPeak saw a strategy and culture based on fighting an all out war against an industrialized nation or coalition. But, that had not proven to be the threat we faced nor the future threat.[5] This is not to diminish the crucial role SAC played in the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War through strategic nuclear deterrence. But, the United States has been involved in three major conflicts since WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf; in each case, strategic bombing failed to prove effective. Additionally, nuclear weapons, a cornerstone to SAC's relevance, played no operational role in any of these conflicts.

SAC's nuclear dependence brought with it several defining elements within the culture. Within the context of Schein's model, they are manifested as espoused values and artifacts. Before we look at the elements that evolved from nuclear dependence, some definitions are in order.

Schein's Cultural Elements Defined

Schein defines basic assumptions as "*unconscious, taken for granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings.*"[6] Schein believes basic assumptions are the core cultural elements; they

explain why organizations do what they do. Basic assumptions are the cultural elements that organizational leaders must enhance, change or eliminate to facilitate change within an organization, or to actually change the organization's culture.

Similarly, he describes espoused values as those values that rise from basic assumptions as articulated beliefs, norms and operational rules of behavior.[7]

Finally, Schein describes artifacts as "*...all the phenomena that one sees, hears and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture.*"[8] The important factor with artifacts is they are easy to see but difficult to decipher. To understand artifacts and their link to the culture, if one exists, requires an understanding of the organization's espoused values and basic assumptions.

SAC's Espoused Values and Artifacts

The crucial element and an espoused value of SAC was a highly centralized, powerful and bureaucratic SAC staff. While it is easy to understand the reasons for this form of an organization, it was very much counter to General McPeak's vision, which will be discussed later.

The reasons for this type of organizational structure were very rational for the times. Dealing with nuclear weapons required a high level of control and vigilance. There was no room for error in peacetime nor war. Additionally, the war SAC was prepared to fight, the Single Integrated Operations Plan

(SIOP), required complete centralized planning and control. It was the war that would end the world, as we knew it, in a matter of days. Additionally, it could erupt with little or no warning. The execution required highly planned, coordinated, choreographed and unalterable sequences of events to insure success. There was no room for thinking--only responding. It was a very procedurally driven culture, another espoused value.

This procedural mentality manifested itself in several very visible artifacts: schedules, regulations and checklist worship. Life in SAC for the wing-level individual was always highly stable. Individuals knew, with a great deal of certainty, exactly what their daily schedules would be for the following three months and to only a little less certainty their schedule for the following six months. Additionally, there were less fixed schedules that would let individuals know their activities for the next 12 months. Flexibility was not required, you only needed to show as scheduled and manage your personal activities around the published schedules. Likewise, regulation and checklist worship, not innovation, were the keys to success.

Individual thinking and innovation were not desired, only responses based upon the sound thought, planning, procedures and guidance provided by the SAC staff. In a culture where there was no room for errors when dealing with nuclear weapons, compliance with regulations and checklists was paramount. The SAC staff devised and developed regulations and checklists, and required unquestioned adherence. Incompetence in basic air sense or basic

operation of an airplane was tolerated, but failing a written test on regulations or accomplishing a checklist item out of order (even for good reason or with no adverse effect) was a career killer.

The linkage between SAC's basic assumption, nuclear dependence, and a powerful command staff structure is clear. The evolution in managing SAC's primary mission, nuclear deterrence, through its belief in an all knowing and powerful staff proved very successful. General Curtis Lemay, the principal architect of the modern day Air Force and American Air Force icon, is a testament to this success.

The last artifact of note linked with this basic assumption of nuclear dependence is the SAC patch. The patch depicts an iron fist holding an olive branch with lightening bolts projecting from it. This certainly portrayed the mission of Strategic Air Command--peace through strength and preparation. But it also symbolized the image of the all powerful SAC staff. Outside the staff it was viewed as an iron fist with a firm grip on the genitals of its subordinate members.

These are the applicable basic assumptions, espoused values and artifacts regarding the Strategic Air Command culture, the original major subculture within the Air Force. These were the elements General McPeak could see that defined SAC and created barriers to his vision of a new, more relevant Air force for the future.

But he also had a second major subculture of the Air Force,

Tactical Air Command, to consider in seeking changes to carry out his vision.

Tactical Air Command and the Conventional Road

Tactical Air Command (TAC) evolved very differently than Strategic Air Command. It was established in 1946 to provide a balance between the strategic (SAC), air defense and tactical forces.[9] In 1948 TAC lost its major command status and was subordinated to Continental Air Command along with the Air Defense Command and all Air Force reserve units.[10] In 1950, Tactical Air Command returned to major command status and was given an operational and administrative mission. There were several key differences that are worth examining.

SAC evolved as a predominantly CONUS and bomber aircraft-based structure with specified and major command status. It owned all the bomber aircraft and the required assets to accomplish its wartime mission. Tactical Air Command was a CONUS fighter aircraft-based command that administered to the other OCONUS-based major commands, supporting the air power needs of the theater commanders. The fighter aircraft linked Tactical Air Command to the other major Commands.

I will use TAC to generalize the entire CONUS and overseas fighter community. This will simplify the division between the bomber and fighter cultures that are reflected in the SAC and TAC cultures, respectively.

A look at the key cultural elements of TAC are in order.

TAC's Cultural Elements

The TAC culture evolved from a support perspective. Their role as a fighter community, in "strategic bombing", was protecting the bombers while providing air superiority and close air support for the Army. Though they did develop a nuclear role, it was in support of tactical operations vice a strategic role and it was always secondary in priority. TAC's priority, conventional support, formed the foundation for its key basic assumption--conventional primacy.

Conventional primacy drove TAC to several crucial espoused values and artifacts that were quite different from SAC's. Their war was one requiring flexibility in a dynamic environment. It was not driven by procedures nor planned to the last detail well in advance. It was reactive vice calculated and measured. "Flexibility is the key to air power" was an espoused value of the TAC culture.

Flexibility manifested itself in training artifacts and reward artifacts that emphasized mission success. As an example, training in TAC focused on the threat, individual aircraft capabilities and tactics. How, when, and where this training was employed was at the discretion of the aviator based upon his situation. The results were judged on merit, not compliance with a regulation or checklist. SAC was very much different. You were provided exactly what you were to do in set situations, including actual boldface (memorization and regurgitation

required) tactics. Whether they were the best under a given situation, was immaterial. For TAC, flexibility meant reward and approval of innovation and mission success in a dynamic environment. You were judged on mission and aircraft competence, not compliance.[1] Similarly, the TAC staff was quite different.

The TAC staff was field oriented with diffused power vice centralized authority. There were two predominant reasons for this espoused value. The first reason was TAC served an administrative support function for the other OCONUS-based major Air Force commands. TAC provided the people, training and equipment for these other commands. This relationship drove a more open and less centralized philosophy. The second reason was the conventional primacy and flexibility beliefs and their impact on the staff's operating style. TAC believed innovation came from the field where the operators were. Operators were the folks who knew the best way to achieve success in combat, not individuals sitting behind desks in a command staff. This allowed a much more open and upward flow of ideas. One such idea was the concept of strategic attack, an espoused value of TAC.

The final espoused value deals with the concept of strategic attack vice strategic bombing. SAC, as discussed earlier was inexorably tied to strategic bombing. This implied that heavy

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[1] Mark Skattum, a Lieutenant Colonel in the United states Air Force and former A-10 Squadron Commander, presented an oral presentation on the culture of an A-10 squadron in the US Army War College's Organizational Cultures course on 26 February 1996. He supported the contention that the fighter culture judges and rewards its members based on mission success and competence in their aircraft.

bombers were strategic weapon systems. The SAC staff and SAC community focused primarily on this mission and this level of war. As technology advanced, fighter and fighter/bomber-type aircraft could effectively attack strategic targets that previously were the domain of SAC. Desert Storm provided many examples with F-117s and F-111s striking strategic-type targets. In addition, there are many historical examples of B-52s striking operational and tactical targets. Vietnam and Desert Storm provide many examples as evidence of this.

Historical evidence led TAC and the entire fighter community to view air power in its entire context of employment across all the levels of operations: tactical, operational and strategic. Levels of operations didn't drive air power solutions. Rather, optimum aircraft mix for the given target and threat drove solutions. It permitted innovation and efficient solutions to evolve in dynamic environments.

In summary, TAC's basic assumption of conventional primacy created many attractive espoused values including flexibility, field-oriented staffs and a belief in strategic attack vice strategic bombing. Additionally, the artifacts of innovation worship and reward for mission success vice compliance were desirable as General McPeak forged his vision for the Air Force of tomorrow.

McPeak's Vision and the External Factors

We've laid a lot ground work in assessing the two key

subcultures within the Air Force that General McPeak had to address to achieve his vision. This is not to slight in anyway his dramatic impacts on the many other subcultures within the Air Force. But, in reality, SAC and TAC were the two competing subcultures vying to be the Air Force's dominant culture. It is time now to look at General McPeak's vision for the Air Force focused on these two subcultures.

Reading through General McPeak's many speeches (see Selected Works 1990-1994) he often cites the vision statement developed by Secretary Rice and the Air Force four star generals: **Air Force people building the world's most respected air and space force-global power and reach for America.**[11] He emphasizes that it is the people who must embrace this vision and make it possible for they are the key to its success. Additionally, the vision requires reliance on the inherent qualities of air and space power: responsiveness, speed, range, and flexibility. His aim was a smaller, stronger post-coldwar Air Force ready to respond rapidly and effectively to unknown and uncertain threats.[12] This vision was most certainly motivated and shaped by some enormous external environmental factors.

There were three dramatic, yet connected, external environmental factors at work during General McPeak's tenure as Chief of Staff. These were the fall of the Soviet Union, Desert Storm and a declining Air Force budget. We will take a short look at each factor and how they shaped his decisions.

The first and most dramatic factor was the fall of the Soviet

Union. This threat shaped and drove the Air Force for its entire 40 year history. The Soviet threat was the entire foundation of SAC. SAC's culture was tied to nuclear deterrence of the Soviet Union. With the fall of the wall, SAC faced a major crisis--no threat. SAC's crisis created opportunity to implement change that General McPeak really believed was important, despite the fall of the Soviet Union. General McPeak believed nuclear deterrence was a Joint mission, not an Air Force mission requiring an Air force command.[13] Additionally, change was imminent, as budgets were declining with the fall of the Soviet threat.

These declining budgets forced a cold hard look at shaping a viable Air Force for the future. It required dealing with significantly reduced force structures.[14] Consolidation has always been an approach to achieving reduced costs through efficiencies and economies of scale. Though very painful, opportunity was created. General McPeak believed the structure of SAC and TAC had created an artificial distinction between tactical and strategic applications, resulting in fragmented air power.[15] Consequently, he had solid justification to embark on implementing significant structural change within the Air Force. Desert Storm only further reinforced his beliefs in these artificial distinctions.

General McPeak saw a blurred picture when trying to sort out strategic and tactical lessons from Desert Storm. We were using fighters to strike strategic targets and bombers to strike

tactical targets, just as we had in previous conflicts.[16] But we had in essence separate air forces within the Air Force--strategic and tactical--with incompatible command and control structures for integrating and controlling the strategic forces (SAC) during conflicts. The division between SAC and TAC made sense initially, but the external environment was now different and the blurring between strategic and tactical forces was no longer justified.

The changes to the Air Force's external environment fulfil Schein's requirement for cultural change to occur. Schein believes disequilibrium must be present if cultural change is to occur. Disequilibrium provides the motivation for change. He describes three processes that must be at work: "*(1) enough discomforting data to cause serious discomfort and disequilibrium, (2) the connection of disconfirming data to important goals and ideals causing anxiety and/or guilt, and (3) enough psychological safety, in the seeing a possibility of solving the problem without loss of identity and integrity, thereby allowing members of the organization to admit the disconfirming data rather than defensively denying it.*"[17]

Cultural Change Unavoidable

SAC had lost its relevance within the Air Force. Its mission was complete and its primary threat no longer existed. The outcry for a peace dividend was loud and clear and the new priority was regional, conventional and smaller-scale conflicts.

The stage was set for General McPeak to make extensive changes within the Air Force: changes driven by need and his beliefs. It is widely documented and understood that change is at the very least difficult and painful to those involved. When it involves modification of a culture or an actual eradication of a culture, it is even more difficult and time consuming. Mr. W. Edwards Deming argues that it can take five to ten years to effect cultural change to Total Quality.[18] Likewise, Mr. Schein warns that cultural changes are highly sensitive and require a receptive organization, ideally already motivated to change.[19] With this as the back drop, General McPeak forged some very courageous changes that will not only change the culture of the Air Force as he saw it, but eliminate a subculture, SAC. Again, General McPeak made many changes affecting the Air Force. But, this paper focus will only be on those changes that impacted SAC and TAC, and how they fit with Schein's mechanisms for changing, modifying or influencing an organizational change.

The first and most dramatic change was the Air Force restructuring. The restructuring was comprehensive and included reducing from 13 major commands to 10, eliminating all Air Divisions, and reengineering the Numbered Air Forces staffs and Air Force Wing structures. This paper will focus on the consolidation of SAC and TAC into one command. General McPeak described in his "Reinventing the Air Force" speech a need to change the "strategic bombing" culture of the Air Force.[20] He did not want evolution through incremental change, but rather a

completely new culture to emerge. This required dramatic steps that resulted in the consolidation of SAC and TAC. The magnitude and effectiveness of General McPeak's changes can be appreciated when viewed from a cultural perspective.

While General McPeak sold the consolidation of TAC and SAC as a merger, in reality it was a hostile takeover by TAC. The new consolidated command was given a new name, Air Combat Command (ACC), but beyond that SAC was given no quarter. The nuclear deterrence role, a crucial basic assumption that drove the espoused values and artifact of the SAC culture, moved to a new joint organization--Strategic Command. Additionally, the new Air Combat Command stood up at Langley, the former home of TAC, vice Offutt, the former home of SAC. Also, the newly formed combined SAC and TAC offices in ACC were headed by TAC officers with SAC officers assuming deputy status. Finally, the new ACC patch was the TAC patch with "Air Combat Command" on its rocker.

The structure was in place to remove "strategic bombing" as the basic assumption of the Air Force. The new ACC viewed, as did General McPeak, that *targets* were strategic--not *aircraft*. Bombers were now just another platform capable of striking tactical, operational or strategic targets. The new cultural assumptions were now in line with reality and historical evidence. The cultural assumptions of TAC were kept in tact. It did lose its name and now had to work daily with folks it had not in the past, but these were only operating adjustments. These operating adjustments were uncomfortable for some, but

TAC's identity as a culture was assured. One other change went to the heart of enhancing the TAC culture and eliminating the SAC culture, general officers as wing commanders.

The rank and file viewed this change only as a way to save general officer billets in a shrinking Air Force, but it was culturally significant. SAC's espoused value, a powerful staff, was effectively undermined and TAC's espoused value, a field oriented staff, was reinforced. This move placed a great deal more power down at the wing level. As General McPeak stated, *"We are moving our senior leadership out of headquarters and into the field. Our vision is an Air Force that is much less bureaucratic, a much more operational, war-fighting service. By putting rank in the field, we empower people at the point of contact."*[21] The SAC culture was doomed, never to rise again.

Schein's Mechanisms for Cultural Change

Will a new Air Force culture arise, as General McPeak desired, from this merger[22] or only a new, improved and dominant TAC culture? The answer will take some years to materialize, but it is certain that the Air Force's basic assumption--strategic bombing nor a dominant SAC subculture will reappear. Schein would call this mechanism for changing a culture, "Change Through Reorganization and Rebirth",[23] at least from SAC's perspective.

Schein describes the "Change Through Reorganization and Rebirth" process as little known or understood. *"The process is traumatic and not typically used as a deliberate strategy, but*

it may be relevant if economic survival is at stake."[24] It is obvious from General McPeak's comments at the SAC deactivation ceremony that he understood this. *"I know that for those who have served Strategic Air Command so well for so long, this is a difficult moment. But SAC's warriors did not sign on for the purpose of being in SAC-they signed up to serve the nation. For the nation, deterrence is not an Air Force mission, requiring an Air Force command."*[25] He closed with an assurance their heritage would follow them to the new Air Combat Command. His comments certainly had a different tone at the TAC deactivation and simultaneous ACC stand-up ceremony.

From the TAC perspective the changes closely resemble Schein's mechanism, "Change Through Systematic Promotion from Selected Subcultures". He describes this as promoting folks from subcultures that you desire the organization as a whole to develop[26]. In the case of TAC, it was placing its subculture in charge. General McPeak, in his comments at the ACC stand-up and TAC deactivation, described it as *"a great day for the Air Force. We are making history today."*[27] It marked the end of the "strategic" Air Force and the dawn of a new Air Force that could organize, train and equip in peacetime for immediate use in the conflicts of the future. For SAC it was the end and for TAC it was a new beginning.

Schein's organizational life cycles are also applicable and relevant. Schein identifies three stages in an organization's life cycle: founding and early growth, midlife, and maturity and

decline.[28] These stages help decide the most effective change mechanism for achieving a cultural change. Obviously, the later in the life cycle the more difficult to effect cultural change and the more effort required to achieve success.

SAC fell into the last category, maturity and decline, which Schein would describe as the point where the culture's shared assumptions become a liability, much like nuclear dependence and strategic bombing had for SAC . It is the time when the organization's products are obsolete. In SAC's case, the nuclear threat no longer existed and nuclear deterrence was obsolete as an Air Force mission. This stage requires the most severe actions to change the culture and fits the "Reorganization and Rebirth" mechanism ideally.

TAC, on the other hand falls nicely into Schein's midlife stage. It is *"an established organization that must maintain itself through some kind of continued growth and renewal process."*[29] The tactical force's mission had not diminished with the fall of the Soviet Union. It arguably grew with the new regional perspective and the nation's increased involvement in regional conflicts. Within the Air Force, TAC needed to survive the decreasing budgets and "Change Through Systematic Promotion from Selected Subcultures", a midlife mechanism was the model. TAC was able to acquire and subsume SAC.

Summary

General McPeak skillfully orchestrated dramatic changes within the Air Force during his tenure as Chief of Staff. His vision for a relevant Air Force for the future was driven by external factors and was confronted by two Air Force subcultures competing for domination. General McPeak clearly understood how culture controls an organization in all that it does and how to manage cultural change. His actions were clearly in line with Schein's model for cultural assessments and his suggested change mechanisms based upon where an organization is in its life cycle.

The Air Force had evolved into two distinct Air Force subcultures each with different basic assumptions and espoused values. SAC was mired in the basic assumption of strategic nuclear bombing, which drove a powerful command staff construct, compliance and stymied innovation. On the other hand, TAC had embraced conventional support as its basic assumption which drove a field oriented staff, flexibility, innovation, and reward for mission success. The changes in the external environment dictated dramatic changes within the Air Force and provided opportunity to consolidate these two subcultures.

Three key environmental factors were at work during General McPeak's tenure. First, the Cold War ended, thereby undermining SAC's relevance and throwing military priorities to regional conflicts. In regional conflicts, the threat is unknown and flexibility and innovation are crucial. Second, military budgets

were in a downward spiral requiring dramatic changes to ensure the survival of the Air Force and opening the door to consolidation. Finally, lessons from the Gulf War affirmed the blurring of lines between strategic and tactical applications of air power. Airframes are not strategic, operational, nor tactical; missions determine the level of war an airframe is operating at, a philosophy in line with TAC and General McPeak's beliefs.

Apparently, SAC's culture did not fit with General McPeak's vision and the changes that had taken place in the Air Force's external environment. From the perspective of Schein's mechanisms for effecting cultural change, General McPeak employed two different change mechanisms. For SAC it was "Change Through Reorganization and Rebirth", SAC's basic assumption, nuclear dependence, left the Air Force entirely and was placed in a new joint organization, Strategic Command. Additionally, the people and assets of SAC were subsumed by TAC in a new TAC, Air Combat Command. For TAC, it was Schein's "Change Through Systematic Promotion from Selected Subcultures". The merger with SAC saved TAC's cultural identity and left TAC the dominant culture within the new Air Combat Command and the Air Force.

General McPeak's skillful management of these two Air Force cultures allowed him to make sweeping changes and begin altering the basic assumption of the Air Force--strategic bombing. It opened the door to his vision *"... the world's most respected air and space force-global power and reach for America."* His vision

requires a culture that is innovative, flexible, able to operate in dynamic environments, and responsive to operators in the field, all elements of the TAC culture.

Conclusion

Will General McPeak's changes endure? Certainly, only time will tell but I believe his crucial changes to these two subcultures will stand the test of time. The Air Force will never again have a command dedicated to nuclear deterrence. It makes no sense in today's Joint environment, unless Air Force airplanes are the only delivery method for nuclear weapons, a proposition I don't believe likely. Without the nuclear mission, the SAC culture cannot rise again. A new Air Force culture is emerging. It is one that views air power in its whole as its strength. It does not have decisive strategic bombing as its basic assumption, but rather sees itself as a component in the Joint world crucial to U.S. dominance in the world--a TAC philosophy.

ENDNOTES

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6.Schein, 17.

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18.W. Edwards Deming, Out of the Crisis, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986), 153-154.

19.Schein, 195-197.

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