



Reimagining Ombudsing. An Operational Reflection on How the Pandemic has Impacted the Work of Ombuds.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a write up of a presentation made to IOA's 2022 conference. It explores the incredibly disruptive impact the COVID pandemic has had, not only upon world communities, but also upon organisational life. Ombuds have been at the pointy end of this impact, and it is timely to reflect upon the impact and the challenges that the COVID pandemic has had upon the work of ombuds. Out of the adversity of the pandemic has come opportunities for the Ombuds profession to reimagine it's role, and some of these opportunities are considered in this paper.

KEYWORDS

opportunities for the Ombuds profession to COVID, Crisis management, Organisational responses, Ombuds Profession



INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisations (WHO) declared the COVID 19 virus a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Since that time there have been more than 610 million infections and over 6.5 million deaths worldwide. As well as infections and deaths, the pandemic has upturned our world and has been incredibly disruptive to our way of life.

Metaphors have been used to help us comprehend the breadth and depth of the challenges that we have faced, as well as the impact that the pandemic has had upon us. Delany (2022), in her newspaper article, 'The pandemic has allowed us to see so much, what will we do with our newfound clarity?', uses the metaphor of a tsunami. She explains that as the ocean retreats prior to an approaching tsunami, it exposes parts of the seabed that are normally underwater and hidden from view.

She further explains that like a tsunami, the pandemic has provided us with a unique opportunity to see the metaphorical seabed of our world, exposing the often-invisible systems that organise and underpin how it functions. But not only has the pandemic exposed the operation of our external systems, our human constructions, it has also provided us with the potential to see and understand more about the operation of our internal systems, our human constructs.

Whilst the pandemic has created significant stress and heightened our vulnerabilities, it has also enabled us to understand our strengths and experience our resilience. Through this adversity we have been provided with an opportunity to review and evaluate our personal goals, and also the values that underpin them.

Opportunities arise when defensive structures are broken down and previously hidden dynamics are exposed, however these opportunities are not always easy to grasp. Powerful dynamics hold both our internal and external systems in place, defending against exposure and resisting efforts to better understand and change them.

In this paper I hope to shine a light on some of these dynamics, to enable a better understanding of how they function, and also to provide an opportunity to reimagine them. In the initial sections of the paper I set the scene, exploring the impact of the pandemic upon the various layers of our world. I then consider the impact of these challenges upon our work as Ombuds. Finally I explore the potential opportunities that arise for the profession, as I seek to reconstruct part of what the pandemic has deconstructed.

THE PANDEMIC JOURNEY

Everyone's pandemic journey is unique. Experiences will differ widely depending upon age, gender, employment status; on the industry you work in and the role that you hold; upon your class, race, ethnicity, and where you live in the world; upon whether you are part of a family unit or you live alone, and upon your access to adequate health care, particularly your access to vaccines.

What is clear is that this journey has sorely tested our resilience, significantly impacted our wellbeing, and resulted in high levels of fatigue and exhaustion. Indeed we have all become worn down by the impact that COVID has had on our way of life.

Despite the strong desire for the pandemic to be over, there is little cause for complacency. Australia, for example, has experienced more deaths in residential aged care in the first four months of 2022, than in the first 2 years of the pandemic. And whilst the first COVID related death



in Australia was over two years ago, around 60% of all deaths have occurred in the first few months of 2022 (Dept of Health, 2022).

At the time of writing there continues to be high levels of infection and death, however governments in Australia have removed all active interventions. Pandemic related news has been relegated to the middle pagers of the newspapers as people seek to move on from the virus. For many in the community this has come to mean a return to pre pandemic life.

The challenge for us all is whether we are we able to learn the lessons from our experience of living through the pandemic?

IMPACT UPON SOCIETY

The pandemic has created incredible turbulence for our world, resulting in conditions that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. And when the tide went out, what became apparent were society's vulnerabilities and inequalities. Indeed those that have been most impacted by the virus have been the poor, the elderly, the disadvantaged, those living in countries that could not afford vaccines, those working in industries that rely upon the free movement of people, and those working casually whereby if you don't go to work you don't get paid.

What we also saw was a powerful amplification of difference and disagreement. Indeed most countries experienced some level of social upheaval, as segments of the community railed against what they experienced as either too much or not enough government intervention. In communities around the world most people trusted the science and trusted their government's responses, however there was also a vocal minority who distrusted government and disbelieved what the science was saying. (For a thoughtful commentary on these themes see The NewYorker's Corona Virus Chronicles. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/coronavirus-chronicles>).

We also saw a rise in hate crime and hate speech as people projected their anger onto groups that represented the 'other', including those they blamed for the pandemic, those they felt were perpetuating what they believed was as a lie and those in leadership that they believed were arbitrarily taking away individual freedoms. This was inflamed by a growing partisanship as the pandemic narrative became politicised.

It is interesting to consider the role that leadership played in creating or supporting these fractured, reactionary responses. Indeed, as the tide went out what we saw was a diversity of leadership responses to the challenges that the pandemic presented. Whilst we saw thoughtless, reactive, and absent leaders, we also saw thoughtful, responsible and humane leaders.

Globalisation contracted and our world shrunk as borders closed, strict quarantine rules were introduced, international travel came to a standstill and many of those who were travelling were prevented from returning home.

For many the pandemic represented an existential threat to their way of life as they struggled just to make ends meet. We became aware of those in the community that had to keep on working in order to survive, including those without sick pay or insurance, and those in small businesses that needed people on the ground to operate. As society retreated, organisations closed and businesses went bust, many governments responded by increasing support for the most vulnerable.

There was widespread fear, anxiety and panic, particularly during the early phases of the pandemic where 'we were dealing with an unknown foe that posed an unknowable risk'. As the



pandemic wore on, people's resilience was impacted, and we saw rising rates of mental ill health in the community (Mannix, 2022).

In this brief summary I have touched upon some of the incredible challenges that countries around the world have faced since the beginning of the pandemic. Whilst some communities experienced more hardship than others, there was an incredible level of turbulence experienced throughout society.

Organisations are an integral part of the communities in which they are located, and they were also called upon to navigate these complex and turbulent conditions.

IMPACT ON ORGANISATIONS

The turbulence that Organisations experienced included staffing related issues, supply chain issues and financial instability. Whilst some businesses were forced to close, many had to restructure and reprioritise activities. This flowed on to employees who experienced insecurity and uncertainty as workplaces closed, downsized, froze their recruiting, imposed furloughs, implemented lay-offs and encouraged early retirement.

Significant workplace adjustments had to be made to support the large-scale movement of the workforce to home based work. Whilst this mass migration of the workforce led to an unprecedented digital acceleration, it also led to complex workforce and management challenges around issues such as productivity, accountability, engagement and the provision of support for a highly distributed workforce (Kniffen, K et al 2021).

The breadth and depth of these disruptions was felt in Organisations throughout the world. The author, as Chair of the International Committee of the IOA, met regularly with Ombuds colleagues operating around the world. It was clear that there was not one Organisation that was not significantly impacted by this upheaval.

Whilst different industries had their own unique challenges, social care agencies and health settings were on the front line of the pandemic and experienced unrelenting stress. The nature of their work meant that they were exposed to the virus as they responded to the growing numbers of sick and vulnerable people. This led to significant illness and death throughout these professions.

In the face of such unrelenting adversity, the opportunity presented itself for many to reflect upon fundamental issues about the future of work, about what the workplace could and should look like, and indeed what people want from their working life. In my practice I saw a rise in visitors wanting to talk about career related issues, including what some commentators have described as 'the great resignation', or 'the great realignment' (Slattery, A. 2022).

IMPACT ON SENIOR MANAGER AND PEOPLE LEADERS

The scale and nature of workplace transitions has been unprecedented, resulting in complex challenges that have tested even the most experienced of leaders. Indeed, a senior leader described the experience of leadership during this time as building the car as we are driving it down the road.

People in management roles faced what I think of as a triple task; that of managing the impact of the pandemic upon themselves (& their families), that of strategically responding to organisational demands, and that of thoughtfully leading and supporting staff. To manage this triple task



effectively requires a complex set of skills and there are few in leadership positions that have all the requisite skills to do this effectively.

My Ombuds program is located in a government department. The department has over 4000 employees in 86 offices throughout the state. I have been the sole Ombuds practitioner for over 10 years. Since the beginning of the pandemic there has been an almost 20% increase in the number of people leaders and senior managers visiting the program. Indeed, at the time of writing this has become the largest cohort of visitors, as leaders and managers seek a safe place to reflect upon their anxiety and stress, obtain advice, support, and encouragement, and utilise a sounding board for exploring interventions.

Many of the problems that leaders face are complex in that there are no definitive answers, there is no manual to refer to, and the pathway towards resolution unfolds only as knowledge and understanding grows. This is an environment that generates high levels of anxiety and requires a specific set of skills, knowledge, resources and support to enable thoughtful engagement with these complexities.

The author observed leaders' default to known responses to the many unique challenges that arose. This occurred because the pressure to act decisively, the demand to create certainty and the desire to find a solution became unbearable. What was helpful for me in this environment was to find a third position, which was outside of these powerful dynamics. This position enabled me to provide emotional containment and it was through this position that I was able to support leaders to sit with high levels of uncertainty and enable more considered responses to emerge. This is what I understand 'the Modern Ombuds' fact sheet to be talking about when it describes the Ombuds role as a 'trusted navigator, providing insight & guidance to inform critical & complex decision-making' (IOA 2021).

During the early stages of the pandemic, I observed many in senior positions responding in a transactional and reactive way. I formed the view that leaders were finding it difficult to appreciate the depth of the challenges that everyone faced, particularly the feelings of fear and anxiety that people were feeling.

A growing number of visitors were complaining that they experienced management as superficial, thoughtless and uncaring. I could see a serious disconnect arising between management and staff and I felt that it was important to raise this growing disconnect with senior leaders. Given the heightened levels of anxiety and stress, I appreciated that this needed to be done sensitively.

I shared my observations with departmental leaders and encouraged the creation of processes that enabled senior leaders to connect directly with staff. The rationale was that a bridge was needed to traverse the divide and create a sense of community. I proposed a number of activities to reflect upon the challenges that everyone was facing, to share concerns and promote some common ground. Indeed, one of these initiatives, that of a town hall meeting, was so successful that it is still occurring two and a half years later.

What was particularly important for the Ombuds program was not so much the outcome, that is the Town Hall initiative, but the strategic way that I approached the engagement with senior management. I considered all of my conversations with leaders as an opportunity to build credibility and develop trust, both in my role and in my approach to the challenges. It was through this sensitive and considered approach that I was also able to nurture an awareness and understanding by leadership of the complex and powerful dynamics that were affecting and infecting everyone.



These strategies were informed by my appreciation of the breadth of challenges that senior leaders and people managers were responding to, including transitioning large segments of the workforce to working from home, developing and implementing vaccine related policies, and responding thoughtfully to the growing impact of workload stressors and pressures.

An important theme that I observed was the rise of the 'Heroic leader', whose response to the crisis was reactive, thoughtless and driven by adrenaline. On the ground this translated to unsustainable work-related pressures, as wellbeing and sustainability was sacrificed to meet some greater heroic goal. My priority in these situations was to position the Ombuds program as an oasis of calm and thoughtfulness, in an otherwise anxious and reactive environment, including regular reminders to leaders about the importance of organisational health and wellbeing.

IMPACT ON WORKERS

For many workers their primary focus, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic, was responding to the threat that the virus posed to themselves and to their families. As I have already identified these concerns were heightened for health sector and other front-line workers who faced significant anxiety and stress, as they courageously responded to the sick and the dying.

As large numbers of workers transitioned to working from home, the important boundary between work and home disappeared. For many families this resulted in increased pressure on personal relationships. These pressures were further exacerbated when school and care programs closed, as many families were required to undertake home schooling and/or caring for vulnerable family members, whilst also responding to work demands.

For those who lived alone, a significant consequence of working from home was the experience of isolation. Indeed maintaining connections and ensuring adequate support for everyone that needed it was increasingly challenging. Across communities we saw increases in the rate of domestic violence, alcohol and drug misuse and mental health related concerns. In my Ombuds program I experienced a doubling of the number of visitors whose primary concern related to high levels of stress and anxiety, and a corresponding deterioration of personal wellbeing (Victorian Government, 2022; Xie, Y 2022).

Throughout this time many visitors reported workload and workplace pressures through business-as-usual demands, the creation of new work priorities and the challenge of engaging in multiple transitions. The relentlessness of these demands resulted in 'COVID burnout', which describes the physical and emotional exhaustion caused by the impact of working in a COVID infected world (Tropping, A, 2021).

One of the consequences of the hardships that people were experiencing was that many started to question their personal values and life goals. As I previously indicated I saw a rise in visitors wanting a safe place to reflect upon their life and career journey, consistent with what some authors have called 'the great realignment'(Ferguson, 2021).

In my 40 year career working for the Government sector I have never experienced such a level of volatility, never worked with a more complex set of dynamics and never been so challenged to create thoughtful responses to such a diverse set of needs.

IMPACT UPON THE WORK OF OMBUDS



The pandemic has had a pervasive impact upon my Ombuds work. Indeed, I cannot think of an issue or a theme that has arisen over the last two and a half years that has not been caused, influenced or affected in some way by the pandemic environment.

An analysis of visitor data identifies that visitor numbers have been down slightly when compared to pre-pandemic years, which I believe can be attributed to staff working from home. Despite the numbers being down there has been a rise in the level of complexity, with issues being emotionally charged and/or involving a number of people, whole teams or cross team conflict. In part I believe that this as an expression of the challenge of working across boundaries in a virtual environment, where the important foundational work that is required to build relationships that enable collaboration is much more difficult to undertake.

I believe that much of the conflict was fuelled by high levels of stress and anxiety, as well as by fatigue and exhaustion. I also noted that people leaders were struggling in the virtual environment to provide adequate supervision and support, and a lack of awareness of staffing related issues made it difficult for them to intervene in a timely manner. In the absence of adequate levels of supervision and support, uncontained and unprocessed emotions can be discharged onto other parts of the system, creating an environment in which it is more likely that conflict will arise.

Visitors were increasingly reporting dissatisfaction and disillusionment with leadership behaviour, describing it as too upbeat, too optimistic, and inauthentic. My hypothesis is that leaders were either misreading the gravity of the situation, or they were defending against their own rising levels of anxiety and concern. Whatever the reason, leaders were coming across as out of touch, lacking any understanding of staff experience and behaving in an unsupportive way.

In my analysis and interpretation of the dynamics at play, I tried to stay mindful of the level of pressure and expectation upon managers, and of the difficult task of leading groups through crisis conditions. I also referenced the work of Laura Crawshaw, a previous IOA keynote speaker, whose research highlights the fact that most abrasive leaders are not intentionally that way, they simply lack understanding and awareness about the impact of their behaviour (Crawshaw, 2010).

Given these complex and challenging conditions I considered it particularly important to thoughtfully frame my approaches to leadership. Under these conditions there is a significant risk that 'upward feedback' will be experienced as criticism or an attack. This can result leaders feeling that they are the victims of people who do not understand the enormity of their challenges. This is a parallel process in that these feelings of victimisation mirror the experience of subordinates who present to the Ombuds program feeling victimised, misunderstood or that their voice is not heard or acknowledged.

What I am not saying is that the Ombuds should avoid difficult upward conversations, however I am highlighting the importance of being aware of the challenging and defensive environments that we find ourselves in. In my practice this awareness informs a curiosity in my engagement with leaders, starting with exploring how they were managing. This involves acknowledging challenging levels of stress and pressure and displaying empathy and understanding, as an important first step, prior to the delivery of any analysis and feedback.

This approach was so well received that it led to a substantial increase in invitations to address leadership groups across the organisation. It also resulted in a significant rise in the number of people leaders visiting the program. As I previously noted, over the last two and a half years this has become the largest cohort of Ombuds visitors, as managers sought a safe place to reflect upon constructively managing difficult HR related challenges, as well as reflecting upon their own concerns about pandemic related anxiety and workplace stress.



A significant learning for me has been that most of my visitors, both staff and managers alike, do not have the concepts nor the language to give expression to the powerful emotions that the pandemic has evoked. This is, after all, not the territory that most people signed up to work in. Given this I have found that many of my interventions involve coaching leaders and their staff to engage in more sophisticated and emotionally literate conversations. These conversations require, in the first instance, the creation of safe and reflective environments that enable people's fears and concerns to be thought about and talked about.

To support this, an initiative of my Ombuds program involved the creation of fortnightly discussion groups, called 'Quiet Conversations'. These were largely unstructured groups where people from across the organisations were supported and enabled to reflect upon their preoccupations. These proved successful and resulted in invitations being received to facilitate more targeted groups in divisions and teams across the organisation.

Stress and its management, anxiety, isolation and disruption have all been themes in these discussions. I found that when people get an opportunity to think about and talk about their preoccupations, they feel heard and understood. This also creates a sense of connection in which people do not feel as alone with their challenges.

When people feel listened to, they are emotionally contained and as a consequence they are able to be more thoughtful and more mindful. If people do not have these opportunities, the risk is that they bottle up their emotions, which can lead to dysfunctional behaviour as they enact their emotions.

The rationale for these interventions is that if people are supported to process their feelings in a constructive way there will be less interpersonal conflict. This means that group oriented reflective activities can be a powerful preventative intervention for Ombuds offices.

Whilst some Ombuds refer highly emotional visitors to the Employee Assistance Program, or for counselling support, it is my experience there is an emotional component to most of the issues that visitors bring to Ombuds programs. Whilst this brings significantly more complexity to the issues that Ombuds are responding to, it also speaks to the need for Ombuds to be capable of working with and working in the powerful emotions that swirl around the systems in which they work.

Emotional literacy therefore is an important part of contemporary Ombuds work. Indeed, an experienced colleague recently observed that whilst they did not sign up to be a therapist, it feels like most of the visitors want the Ombuds to be one. My colleague was identifying the Ombuds' growing role in providing emotional containment, or as Bill Eddy from the High Conflict Institute frames it, calming people's emotions before undertaking cognitive work such as problem solving. (Link; <https://www.highconflictinstitute.com/>)

In my work throughout the pandemic, I have been sustained by my training in organisational dynamics, which has enabled me to draw upon both systemic and psychodynamic frameworks. These frameworks helped me to create a sophisticated understanding of the complex dynamics at play, enabled me to contain the strong emotions present in the system and supported me to work effectively in such a challenging environment.

REIMAGINING THE OMBUDS ROLE – OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

The pandemic has created significant adversity for individuals, for organisations, and also for Ombuds programs. I am however reminded of a quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin, that 'Out of Adversity Comes Opportunity'. I would therefore like to consider for a moment what potential



opportunities arise for the Ombuds profession out of the adversity that we have faced during the pandemic?

In his wonderful article in the 2017 Journal of the IOA, our esteemed colleague Wayne Blair called upon us to 'Reimagine the Ombuds role'. In this reimagining, he advocated for Ombuds to be 'more progressive, more active and more assertive'. Indeed, Wayne envisioned Ombuds as a trusted, thoughtful and influential voice at the table. He believed that by taking this place at the table, Ombuds could become a transformational leader in the Organisation (Blair 2017).

My recollection at the time was that Wayne's thoughts were considered provocative. Indeed, I imagine that many Ombuds saw this vision as aspirational, something to be considered at some later time. Perhaps these thoughts were viewed this way because in order for something to be reimagined, it firstly needs to be unsettled. I submit that the pandemic has certainly unsettled everything and that it has actually created the environment where we should be actively reimagining our role.

The potential to actively engage in reimagining the Ombuds role has been made possible because, when the tide went out, defensive and conservative structures that have been holding systems in place have become exposed, and because of that exposure we are able to reassess and re-evaluate whether they meet our values, goals and the direction we want the profession to take.

Our Organisations have also been thrust into this volatile, uncertain and complex environment. It is an environment where vulnerability is high, where many leaders are looking for support and they are more open to considered and thoughtful guidance from a trusted professional

THE EVOLUTION OF OMBUDS WORK

The COVID pandemic has been a great disruptor, creating conditions that are at once unsettling, and also enabling the potential for new growth. When I think about reimagining the Ombuds role I think about the next steps in the evolution of our profession. Indeed, I think that the next steps involve us defining the seat that we want to claim at the table.

The IOA's recent information sheet, 'The Modern Ombuds' describes Ombuds as 'a source of insight and guidance'. In order to take up this role I believe we need to shift our focus, from responding to the symptoms of organisational dysfunction, to analysing, diagnosing, prescribing and leading systemic interventions. This is a shift from working predominantly on the surface, to working under the surface of organisational life (IOA 2021).

Whilst I am not suggesting that we give up our primary focus of working with conflict and disputes, I am suggesting that the next steps in the evolution of the profession will be taken by Ombuds who can analyse, interpret and report on organisational data in a more erudite way. It will also be taken by Ombuds who are able to develop more sophisticated relationships across the organisation, with a focus upon senior management.

To enable the Ombuds Profession to evolve in this way I believe that we should more clearly define our profession in terms of the primary task, as well as the core skills and competencies required to undertake that task. This will require expanding our training program to broaden the frameworks that we draw upon.

Ombuds need to better understand and work with complexity, with uncertainty and with the emotions that are at the heart of organisational dynamics. I believe that these are the critical



systems that we have become aware of as the tide has gone out, and as Ombuds we need to be comfortable and confident working both in them and with them.

An important part of Ombuds work is to ensure that we are not pulled into and pushed around by the powerful and often unconscious dynamics that swirl around under the surface of organisational life. This means that in order to be able to effectively undertake Ombuds work we need to be supported and contained. In an article in the 2020 JIOA, David Miller and I proposed that the profession implement a formal model of supervision and support for Ombuds (Wright and Miller, 2020).

Our premise was that given the significant challenges of the work, Ombuds need their own reflective space, they need to be able to get support to process their emotions, and they should have their work challenged, in a constructive way. One of the main goals of a program such as this is to ensure that Ombuds are in the best psychological frame of mind to assist others. We submitted that this should be done through a structured dialogue with a trusted other. Indeed, what we were proposing for Ombuds mirrors the process that Ombuds seek to create for their visitors.

I identified earlier that my training in organisational dynamics has been incredibly supportive to me in my work over the last 2 years. At the centre of this training is the application of group relations theory, systems theory and psychodynamic theory to individual, group, organisational and societal challenges. I believe that the development of these frameworks, as they apply to the work of Ombuds, would be incredibly helpful to the development of the profession. They are taught through institutions such as AK Rice Institute and its affiliates in the US (www.akriceinstitute.org), the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK (www.tavinstitute.org) as well as in affiliated organisations around the world.

SOME CHALLENGES FOR OMBUDS

As a profession we need to consolidate the knowledge that we have gained from the experience of the last two and a half years. One significant issue for Ombuds is that of burnout. Whilst fatigue and exhaustion are an inevitable consequence of our work, these have been exacerbated by the relentlessness of COVID related challenges, including the emotional content in the presentations to our programs. Our experiences make it even more compelling for the profession to prioritise issues such as wellbeing, self-care and professional development. As I have already mentioned this should also include regular opportunities for coaching, supervision and support.

I believe that the IOA has an important role to play in creating more clarity around the Ombuds role, reviewing the core skills required for the job and reinvigorating training that is currently available. I further submit that the profession should consider mandating professional development and mentoring minimum requirements.

Just as our leaders are building their cars as they are driving them down the street, so Ombuds have been thrust into unique and challenging situations on a daily basis. What is important is that we maintain role clarity, as well as create well-defined and firm boundaries to protect and guide our work. We also need to mitigate the risk of being flooded by visitor's emotions, as well as being worn down by the complexity and demands of the current environment.

I submit that it is also important for Ombuds to find a considered balance in their work with people leaders and senior management. If this balance is lost, at best we will diminish our effectiveness and at worst our programs will be at risk. The complexity of the COVID infected environment makes the management of this relationship challenging.



Another challenge is the maintenance of Independence and Neutrality, in an environment that is often dominated by loud, forceful and highly emotional voices. It is not easy determining and holding a position on contested issues, whilst being true to our standards of practice. We need to find our own voice; we also need to support and enable those who may have lost their voice in this environment.

In closing I want to return to the metaphor of the ocean retreating prior to an approaching tsunami, and how it exposes parts of the seabed that are normally underwater, and therefore hidden from view. In this paper I have tried to explore some of those things that I have seen when the seabed of my world, and my organisation, has become exposed. I am interested to understand what others might have seen and indeed how our association can use the insights that the pandemic has created to support the growth and development of the profession.



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