

# The Engaged Government Project: Learning When, Where and How to Engage Both Inside and Outside the Government Tent<sup>#</sup>

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## **Abstract**

There has been a change in the mode of governing in Australia and elsewhere from government to governance. Features of this change include a shift towards whole-of-government activity, devolution of government business to the region and a blurring of the demarcation between state and civil society, potentially providing citizens with greater opportunities to influence government policy.

The Queensland Government Department of Main Roads, Department of Natural Resources and Mines and Department of Transport, with the Local Government Association of Queensland, have recognised the need to learn how to improve their understanding of this change and how it may affect their policy and practice. In 2004, researchers from Central Queensland University, Griffith University and University of Queensland, with the support of the Australian Research Council, commenced a three-year action research study of government–community engagement for regional outcomes, working in collaboration with the agency partners, focussing on five case studies in Central Queensland.

This Engaged Government Project is the second phase of a two-phase project. Phase 1 scoped the enablers and barriers to joined-up decision-making and set the research questions for Phase 2. The second phase involves researchers from three disciplines — economics, public policy and sociology and aims to examine the conditions (strategic, structural and procedural) under which multi-sectoral collaboration can deliver policy coherence and positive regional outcomes, as well as identifying the costs, benefits, trade-offs and capacities associated with multi-sectoral collaborations. The research findings will apply not only to the partners involved but also more broadly across government, which has a strong commitment to whole-of-government outcomes and ‘seamless’ service delivery.

This paper provides a window into a work in progress. It highlights lessons from Phase 1 explaining three themes to be explored in Phase 2: purpose; integration; and knowledge of existing capacity and capacity building requirements for engaged government. From a project

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<sup>#</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors as participant-researchers in the Engaged Government Project and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of any of the organisations participating in the Engaged Government Project.

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management perspective, lessons from Phase 2 research to date include: the need to embrace and learn from conflict and to clearly understand your own and other participants' motivations well; and to clarify roles and responsibilities, making certain that these coincide with project participants' motivations as much as possible. From a PhD researcher's perspective, the disparity between the much higher level of complexity of practice observed in the field and that reported in the literature has been striking. So too is the veracity of the notion that collaboration may resolve problems of duplication among various agencies and across tiers of government, especially if the institutional structures collaborating agencies inhabit remain unaltered, and continue to support individual agency-centred practices. From a government partner's perspective, an important observation has been that effective engagement needs to occur inside as well as outside government and that government engagement processes need to align with other government processes and timeframes. The importance of having people with skills, authority, visibility and personal attributes to work across agencies, tiers of government and the community has also been observed to be vital to this process.

Given the collaborative nature of this research project there is also much that may be learnt about collaboration, its place, practice and limitations by systematically studying the collaborations that occur in the research project itself. Findings to date from a 'meta-study' that is investigating this as part of the project are also presented. These meta-study outputs may usefully inform and improve the conduct of the research project, the findings of the Engaged Government Project as well as other government–university research and development (R&D) collaborations.

### **Keywords**

Collaboration, inter-agency, local government, state government, regional outcomes

### **Introduction**

There is a significant body of work that can be called upon to guide involvement of civil society in government decision-making (Arnstein 1969; Calder 2002; Connor 1994; Dukes et al. 2001; Fischer 2000; Gray 1989; Tennyson and Wilde 2000). However, engaging the communities that make up civil society effectively and legitimately in ways that are seen as successful by both communities and government, remains a challenging task for all tiers of government and the agencies that serve them (Buchy and Race 2001; Coggins 1998; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Darlow and Newby 1997).

This paper describes a three-year participatory action research project designed to address this need currently underway in the Central Queensland region of Australia titled 'Engaged Government: A study of government–community engagement for regional outcomes'. Now entering its second year and supported by an Australian Research Council Industry Linkage Grant, the Engaged Government Project is a collaboration between three universities — Central Queensland University, Griffith University and University of Queensland; and three

state agencies — Main Roads, Natural Resources and Mines and the Queensland Transport and the Local Government Association of Queensland.

The project is investigating the value of collaboration between different government agencies, tiers of government and the community as a means of delivering regional outcomes and seeks to understand factors that may enable and inhibit collaboration. As a PhD researcher, senior bureaucrat and research project manager, the authors of this paper seek, as representatives of the project partners, to provide insights into the Engaged Government Project — the challenges we face in working together and what we have learnt to date about 'engaged government'. We are all participant-researchers — although those of us from government may see ourselves more as 'participants' than 'researchers', and those of us from universities may see ourselves more as 'researchers' than 'participants'. Each of us brings different perspectives, interests, skills and knowledge to the project.

Focussing on the Engaged Government Project and its associated meta-study, this paper:

- situates the project in the relevant literature
- describes the background to the project
- presents the differences in motivations for involvement of agency and research partners, highlighting areas of overlap that have provided a basis for the development and implementation of the research project
- explains key lessons arising from the research to date
- indicates future activities being undertaken as part of the project.

### **Project background**

The Engaged Government Project is the second phase of a two-phase research project. In Phase 1, supported by the Queensland Government Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Department of Main Roads, Department of Transport, and Premier and Cabinet, Guthrie (2002) prepared a scoping paper, involving a literature review informed by case study fieldwork. The aim was to “scope institutional and organisational barriers and enablers to greater interagency collaboration and joining up around engagement activities, with an emphasis on regional programs” (Guthrie 2000, p. 2). This work was based on the premise that “successful change in the public sector is seldom achieved by dramatic slash and burn. Successful change needs to be supported by those in power and by the existing staff. It takes time and knowledge and there are no short cuts” (Mant 2002). The Phase 1 scoping paper also included a discussion of the political, cultural and administrative context within which discussions about government–community engagement and greater agency collaboration are situated (Guthrie 2002, p. 2). While the project title may emphasise government–community engagement for regional outcomes, both phases of the project focus heavily on engagement within and between tiers of government as a means of facilitating such outcomes. Table 1 summarises the findings of Phase 1.

**Table1. Summary of Phase 1 findings (after Guthrie 2002)**

<b>Key themes emerging from the literature and Central Queensland case study research</b>	<b>Barriers to engaged government for regional outcomes</b>	<b>Enablers to engaged government for regional outcomes</b>	<b>Reforms necessary for engaged government for regional outcomes</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Fragmentation of purpose	Common purpose	Building an institutional base focussing on public service values and responsibilities; better understanding institutional complexity; developing governance frameworks, vision, principles and a strong business rationale
<b>Integration</b>	Lack of integration of structures and systems	Aligning structures and systems with regional needs	Developing a suitable institutional framework with definable regional boundaries and a policy imperative tied to cabinet objectives, budget processes and performance management systems; formalising regional strategic planning processes aligned with government budgetary cycles and constituting a regional managers' group with appropriate accountability and authority for delivering the regional strategic plan; and supporting this regional governance system with a regional information system
<b>Knowledge of existing capacity and capacity building requirements</b>	Poor capability for working in new ways	Developing capabilities for innovation	Empirical research to develop a demand-side assessment of factors, conditions, dynamics and relationships that are likely to characterise regional governance systems

With the continuing support of the government partners, an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant was obtained to undertake the empirical research to develop a 'demand-side assessment' of the factors that contribute to effective government–community engagement for regional outcomes, as highlighted by Guthrie (2002) above. This has formed Phase 2 of the project. Essential also to Phase 2 has been the support of the Central Queensland Regional Managers' Coordination Network,<sup>4</sup> the type of group that Guthrie (2002) suggests, with the appropriate authority and accountability, would become a key part of necessary reform processes to address any regional integration issues that may currently exist.

<sup>4</sup> These networks are comprised of state agency regional managers. They seek to improve coordination and integration of government programs and services at a regional level.

Taking a multi-disciplinary approach, the Engaged Government Project Research Team formed in early 2004 and consists of five chief investigators and three PhD students from Central Queensland University, Griffith University and University of Queensland in the disciplines of economics, public policy and sociology respectively. The research team is using an action research method (Carr and Kemmis 1986) to investigate five case studies that all intersect in varying ways with the activities of the Central Queensland Regional Coordination Network. Three of the case studies relate to engagement between local and state government and place-based communities to undertake various infrastructure planning initiatives. All are at varying stages of maturity in terms of the planning process. The fourth case study relates to a broader regional planning initiative. The fifth case study focuses on a community-based regional natural resource management group formed as a result of Australian and state government agreements to disperse funds from the Natural Heritage Trust II and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality nationwide, through a regionalised planning and implementation process (Australian Government 2002).

### **Engaged government project objectives**

These five Central Queensland cases and their interactions with the Central Queensland Regional Managers' Coordination Network serve as a setting within which the Engaged Government Project partners can undertake action research to:

- assess the value of multi-sectoral collaboration to long-term positive regional outcomes
- determine the enabling and accountability frameworks and mechanisms needed to encourage and manage multi-sectoral collaborative relationships
- decide who or what makes best value collaborative partners and how much to invest in collaborative work vis-à-vis costs, benefits and outcomes
- identify, at an institutional level, what structural arrangements (regional coordinating mechanisms), managerial strategies (outcomes-based management) and participant capacities (negotiating, brokering) build the capacity for collaboration and, potentially, policy coherence.

### **Reasons for involvement**

While everyone involved is seeking to meet the objectives of the project as set out in the Australian Research Council project grant application and listed above, there is a variety of associated reasons or motivations for participation that also underpin their involvement.

For example, the chief investigators and PhD researchers from the universities involved will gain minimal reward from and indeed, have little power or authority to command politicians or senior public servants to implement policy reforms that may enable government agencies, tiers of government and community to know when where and how to engage more effectively with each other to ensure better regional outcomes. As such, their job is systematically to investigate the five case studies to gain as full an understanding as possible of issues that may be amenable to engaged government, the contexts within which they occur, and factors that may enable or inhibit collaboration between agencies, tiers of government and communities to allow such issues to be resolved. For the PhD researchers there are also

other motivations. These relate to actually obtaining a PhD and in so doing making a contribution to both theoretical and empirically derived knowledge. There is also recognition that being involved in such a collaborative research process may ensure that knowledge gained is more 'robust' due to the interaction with industry partners.

Government partners are increasingly seeing a need for greater community involvement in government policy making being driven by change and the growing complexity, or better understanding, of the environment in which decision-making takes place. From a government perspective, community involvement presents as both a challenge and a solution. On the one hand, it may be perceived by those elected to government as a means by which their authority may be usurped by illegitimate means. On the other hand, it may also provide essential input, making difficult government decisions easier to make, and complex policies easier to develop and implement.

One proposition is that government agencies may need to change their roles and become less 'rule makers', but rather skilful intermediaries who facilitate the involvement and agreement of interested parties. Any change in role needs to be practical, yet based on a solid foundation of empirically and theoretically derived evidence if it is to be supported institutionally and politically. In this respect the Engaged Government Project is well placed in that the project partner team is made up of researchers who can supply the understanding necessary to inform this change process. As well agency partners have the skills, experience and knowledge to 'create a following breeze' and plan and implement any necessary reforms as scoped in Phase 1, to allow government agencies to serve their regional communities more effectively.

## **Lessons to date**

### ***R&D project manager's perspective***

#### *Embrace and learn from conflict*

From a project manager's perspective, in terms of the meta-study there are several lessons that have already been learnt about research and development (R&D) collaborations involving university researchers and government. These may help the project group, the practice of engaged government and government–university R&D collaborations more generally.

For example, typical of a newly-formed social group as described by Tuckman and Jensen (1977), some conflict emerged early in Phase 2 among members of the newly-formed project partners' group.<sup>5</sup> Much of this early disagreement or 'storming' related to a lack of clarity within the group as to what the project was actually about from group members' perspectives,

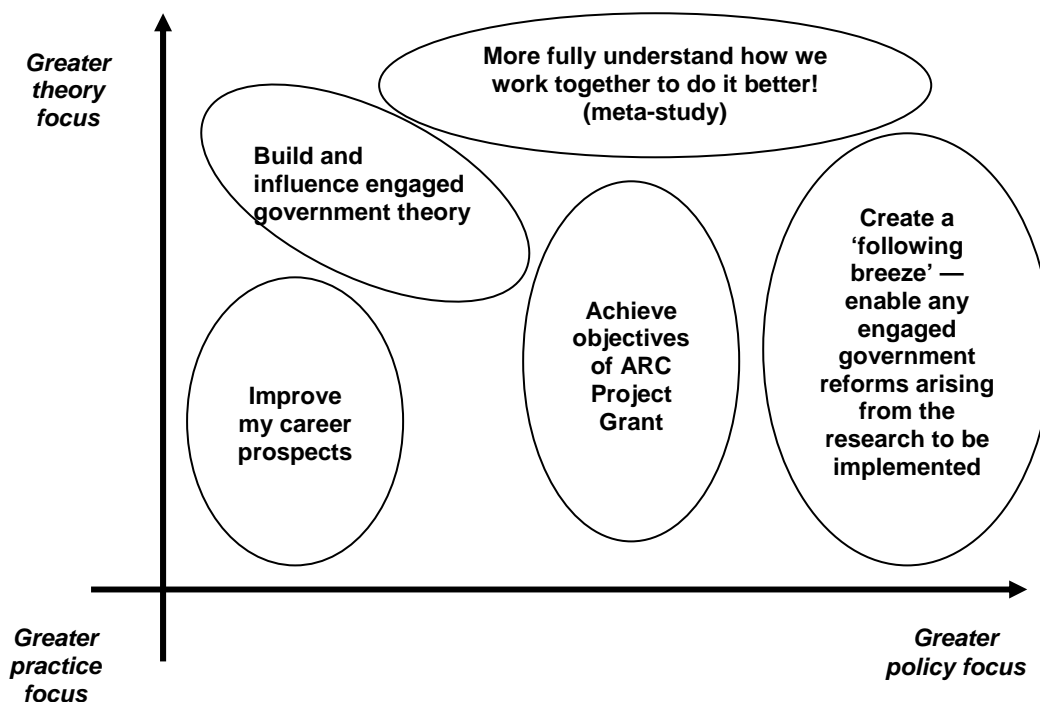
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<sup>5</sup> Tuckman and Jensen (1977) typify the life of a social group in stages including — forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning. The Project Partners' Group is made up of representatives from Central Queensland University, Griffith University, University of Queensland, Main Roads, Natural Resources and Mines, Transport and the Local Government Association of Queensland.

how these objectives related to their motivations for becoming involved, and a call for the roles and responsibilities of the various parties involved to be spelt out precisely.

*Understand your own and others' motivations*

At several project meetings the project manager has worked with partners to clarify exactly how their motivations or reasons for involvement related to each other and the project objectives. The resulting 'vision space', describing the project partners' motivations or reasons for involvement and their relationship to the project objectives, is presented as Figure 1.

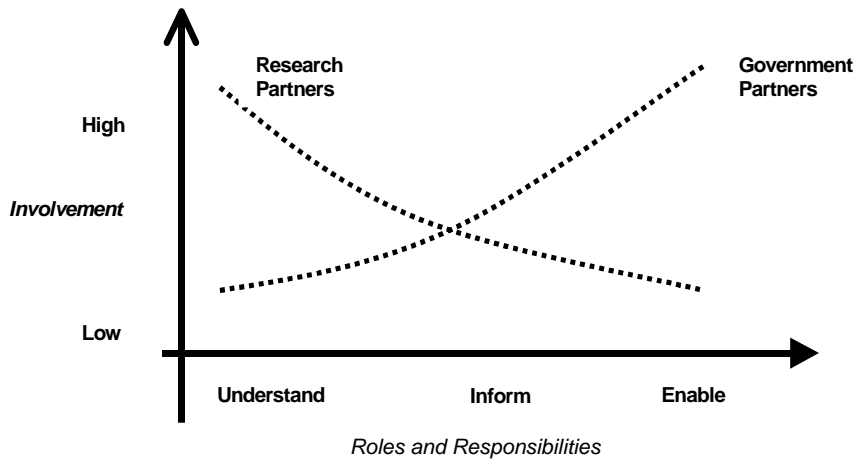


**Figure 1. Engaged Government Project 'Vision Space'**

The ARC project objectives sit centrally on the diagram as they relate to both theory and practice on one continuum and policy and practice on the other. The motivations of the participants fall into 'clusters' around the project objectives when plotted against these axes. Placing these motivations and objectives 'on the one page' has helped to assuage some fears that partners may hold that their needs in relation to the project were not going to be recognised and respected. Figure 1 also shows that the project objectives are central to the overall interests of the Engaged Government Project Team.

*Clarify roles and responsibilities making certain they coincide with motivations for involvement as much as possible*

It would appear intuitively sensible that partners' roles and responsibilities should coincide with their reasons for involvement as much as possible. In simple terms, Engaged Government Project partners may be viewed as being either researchers or from government. Their levels of activity in relation to conceptually defined roles and responsibilities are depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Activity levels and roles and responsibilities**

There is always a danger in generalising when presenting such a figure. For example, some government partners may have a very good understanding of engaged government, its value and enablers and inhibitors to the process. Some researchers may also play a role in exerting influence to create a climate for change within government agencies, or in helping to formulate new policy. Roles may also change over time. Some researchers, particularly the PhD students, have expressed concern that they see their role as one of generating understanding about the place and practice of engaged government based on insights derived from theory and empirical observation in the case studies. Understandably, they do not see their role as enabling or implementing a government reform package or in 'creating the following breeze' within government to allow such reform to occur. Figure 2 emphasises how the researchers and government partners may have distinct yet, at times, overlapping roles and responsibilities. This is in keeping with the action research method being used in the project (Carr and Kemmis 1986). While the researchers may only have a minor role in actually enabling and implementing reform, they have an important role in providing a foundation of understanding and information on which any necessary reforms can be built.

### ***PhD researcher's perspective***

#### *Appreciate the complexity of practice*

The PhD researchers have all undertaken their first set of fieldwork. They note at least three assumptions that underpin the drive to use collaborative practices. First, collaboration is intended to produce improved outcomes, for instance, improved service delivery. Second, collaboration is expected to overcome the perceived difficulties associated with working in a

'silo' mentality (Jackson 2003, p. 21). Third, the community is able to contribute to solving problems rather than the government simply providing the solutions (Gray et al. 2003, pp.13-15; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, p. 37).

While these assumptions capture some of the reasons for collaboration, the literature does not always encapsulate what happens in practice. For example, collaboration may be the most appropriate way to get a job done because a particular issue affects several groups, and their cooperation is needed in order to allow completion. The reason for collaborating then is not about overcoming the perceived difficulties of the 'silo' mentality, it is about the operational side of work — in other words it is about getting the job done. To this extent, it can be argued that there are other factors that can influence government agencies in their use of collaboration to develop policy. As a result the literature fails to appreciate the complexity of practice, as observed in initial field observations. The literature needs to be expanded to describe this complexity and look more realistically at why agencies, industry and the community work together and what they get from working together. The implications from such findings may then assist practitioners to reflect upon this knowledge and perhaps help them to work together more effectively. The Engaged Government Project may help this to occur.

*Collaboration does not reduce duplication and fragmentation as a matter of course*

The literature indicates that collaboration delivers greater efficiency through reduction of duplication and fragmentation in service delivery between agencies and across the various tiers of government (O'Farrell 2002; Reddel 2002). However, observations from the first set of fieldwork undertaken for the project render this assertion questionable. Collaboration does not exist in vacuum. Institutional structures both formal and informal can affect the degree to which collaboration can be applied to resolve policy and administrative problems.

Government, for example, operates according to institutional mechanisms such as the 'expectations' of agencies, the unwritten rules by which agencies operate and respond to issues (O'Faircheallaigh et al. 1999, pp. 72-9) and statutory requirements (Pollitt 2003, p. 43). This can become complicated when there are competing expectations, and tensions can emerge about who is 'right'. Each agency has specific objectives and goals they need to meet. This limits the capacity of agencies to reduce duplication and fragmentation when they have set requirements that must be delivered. This is further exacerbated by the culture of organisations whereby "public servants are rewarded and encouraged for thinking in terms of individual agencies" (Vincent 1999, p. 54).

*Effective collaborative institutional arrangements are 'fit for purpose'*

Hence, collaboration cannot resolve the problems of duplication and fragmentation when the institutional structures encourage and support agency-centred practices. If collaboration is to be applied successfully, institutional arrangements need to mirror new ways of doing and thinking. Bearing in mind the exhortations of Mant (2002) and the elements of his 'recipe' for how change occurs in the public service, it may well be that the outcomes of the Engaged

Government Project provide at least part of the knowledge base to allow such reforms to occur.

### ***Government partner's perspective***

*For engagement to be effective it must occur both inside and outside the 'government tent'*

However, some of the change that may need to occur will lie outside the domain of government. From a government partner's perspective and the Central Queensland experience, there is recognition of two other factors that lie 'outside the tent' which are also important for effective engaged government. These include the need for:

- processes to allow communities and individuals to participate and engage in issues that affect their wellbeing. These processes rely on trust and the development of relationships built through regular interaction and dialogue
- community engagement needs to be viewed as a routine part of management accountabilities throughout the region. This allows for the development of a shared regional view of issues to be developed and solutions to be proposed through more open decision processes.

Such processes close the gap between experts and citizens, enhance community participation, allow knowledge to be created and shared and lead to an improvement in regional resource allocation and accountability. This has also led to a joint sharing of accountabilities and funding responsibilities. Government participants observe that in some instances real cost savings have been made through sharing of resources across a range of projects in Central Queensland Region (e.g. Capricornia Integrated Transport Plan completed collaboratively by regional state and local government staff participants cost an estimated \$80,000. A similar Integrated Transport Plan in Mackay was undertaken predominantly by consultants for around \$400,000). The work of the economics researchers involved in the Engaged Government Project will attempt further to quantify these costs and benefits.

*Alignment of government engagement processes with other government processes enhances government community engagement efforts*

From a government partner's perspective, alignment of engagement processes with other government processes, including policy development and strategic planning, is viewed as critical to engaged government. Government partners' observations to date are that this alignment needs to be based on:

- a stakeholder analysis that includes an understanding of who to engage with and their expectations
- clear objectives and performance indicators of the engagement process
- the public sector having appropriate capacity to engage in the process in terms of budget, skilled people and the authority to engage in the process.

*Effective engaged government requires skilled people, healthy personal relationships, and astute leadership*

Engagement between government agencies, tiers of government, and communities occurs in 'grey areas' that exists between organisations. From experience in the field and through involvement in the Engaged Government Project, government partners have identified that individuals working in these 'grey areas' need to be:

- politically aware
- personable
- trusted
- committed and knowledgeable
- strategic and lateral thinkers
- facilitators and negotiators
- networkers
- excellent communicators
- reliable
- recognisable
- aware of the limits to engagement, how decisions will be made on the issue at hand
- not bound to the concept of traditional organisational boundaries.

Central to this rather daunting list of attributes lies understanding on the part of these individuals that engagement processes are based on relationships between people. Individuals need to be empowered to build these relationships if effective engagement is to occur. In large part, empowerment of individuals working in these 'grey areas' must come from senior management of the agencies and tiers of government involved in the engagement process. Engagement may be perceived as a risk by senior management and elected officials. However, as mentioned earlier, effective engagement provides essential input to difficult government decisions, and provides for greater acceptance of the outcomes of these decisions by all who may be affected by them. Potential risks need to be weighed against potential benefits.

## **Conclusion**

True to the action research method being used in this project, time has been set aside for reflection and evaluation and formalised as 'learning dialogues' between government and research partners. These are occurring throughout the life of the project. It is in these dialogues that the value of the tentative findings listed here, along with other research outputs can be tested by all participants. This iterative process of participant evaluation (Garaycochea 1990) allows for the 'action component' of the research to occur. Participants can provide immediate feedback on research findings, test these findings back in their work settings and provide further feedback.

The value and reliability of project research findings will be further tested at two annual learning seminars where they will be presented to a larger Central Queensland audience

interested and experienced in engaged government and their feedback sought. In conjunction with this process, government partners are currently working together to develop and implement a communication strategy focussing within state and local governments to create a climate of understanding that may enable any policy reforms based on Engaged Government Project research findings to be implemented. Meta-study findings are informing the conduct of the project and will also inform project research outputs. These meta-study findings may also help to improve understanding and practice of government–university R&D collaborations more generally.

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