

Leadership: A complex concept awaiting a new explanation?

Liderazgo: ¿Un concepto complejo esperando una explicación?

Liderança: Um conceito complexo esperando uma explicação?

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ABSTRACT

Leaders have the task of developing future strategy while being consciously engaged in executing current strategy and mapping landmarks, pathways and obstacles which they meet as they endeavor to traverse challenging, rapidly evolving terrain. In an era in which there is a global leadership credibility crisis, business as usual is no longer an option in the pursuit of the longer-term survival of any organization. The leadership approach to complexity outlined here is based on learning to achieve results through experimentation, learning, and reflection.

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A case study is presented that illustrates the application of this approach. In this paper, the reader is first introduced to a brief overview of some key definitions and debates, shifting leadership boundaries, and emerging accountabilities and opportunities. This is followed by a summary of some of the key topics and issues that face current and future leaders.

Key words: Leadership, learning networks, organizational learning, knowledge management.

RESUMEN

Los líderes tienen la tarea de diseñar las estrategias futuras y permanecer comprometidos con la ejecución de las estrategias actuales, al mismo tiempo que van marcando hitos con los obstáculos y pasadizos con lo que se encuentran mientras atraviesan, emprendedoramente, un territorio que cambia y evoluciona rápidamente. En una época en la que hay una crisis de credibilidad de liderazgo en el mundo, manejar los negocios como de costumbre ha dejado de ser una opción que permita a las organizaciones lograr perdurabilidad y sobrevivencia en el largo plazo. El enfoque de liderazgo para enfrentar complejidad que aquí se presenta, se fundamenta en aprendizaje para obtener resultados por medio de la experimentación, la observación y la reflexión; lo que se ilustra con un estudio de caso que muestra la aplicabilidad de este enfoque. En primer lugar este artículo proporciona una visión breve de conceptos y debate claves que alteran las fronteras del liderazgo, de la responsabilidad pública y de las oportunidades. Luego presenta un resumen de algunos de los tópicos y asuntos claves que los líderes del futuro deberán enfrentar.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo, redes de aprendizaje, aprendizaje organizacional, gestión del conocimiento.

RESUMO

Os líderes têm a tarefa de criar as estratégias futuras e permanecer comprometidos com a execução das estratégias atuais, ao mesmo tempo em que vão criando marcos com os obstáculos e passadiços como o que se encontram enquanto atravessam empreendedoramente, um território que muda e evoluciona rapidamente. Em uma época na que existe uma crise de credibilidade de liderança no mundo, manejar os negócios como de costume tem deixado de ser uma opção que permita às organizações lograr perdurabilidade e sobrevivência no longo prazo. O enfoque de liderança para enfrentar complexidade que aqui se apresenta, fundamenta-se em aprendizagem para obter resultados por meio da experimentação, a observação e a reflexão; o que se ilustra com um estudo de caso que mostra a aplicabilidade deste enfoque. No primeiro lugar, este artigo proporciona uma visão breve de conceitos e debate chaves que alteram as fronteiras da liderança, da responsabilidade pública e das oportunidades. Depois, apresenta um resumo de alguns dos tópicos e assuntos chave que os líderes do futuro deverão enfrentar.

Palavras-chave: liderança, redes de aprendizagem, aprendizagem organizacional, gestão do conhecimento.

I. LEADERSHIP: WHAT IS IT AND WHO HAS IT?

Leadership in itself is difficult to define and there are so many definitions and models of leadership in the academic and practitioner literature that it is impossible to detail them all in this article.

Spicker (2012) acknowledged the many ambiguities regarding leadership, including what it refers to, what it is, and what it involves. He summarizes the principal classes as follows:

- Leadership as Motivation and Influencing individuals and groups' activities to achieve goals in specified situations
- Leadership as a Set of Personal Attributes or Traits such as extrovert versus introvert personalities and charisma and emotional intelligence used to motivate and influence
- Leadership as a System of formal Authority: leaders are the ones 'in charge'
- Leadership as a Relationship with Subordinates: leaders need followers and work to achieve goals through their followers
- Leadership as a Set of Roles leaders take to 'lead by example',

to inspire or motivate others or to pioneer change or as part of an executive teams' role set as Belbin (1996/2011) describes roles people enact at work

- Leadership as Management which has been much-debated, and Bennis' (2003) quote about leaders 'doing the right thing' versus managers 'doing things right' is often used to make that point

Definitions of leadership are therefore a contested and often confused area of academic research and practitioner debate (Higgs, 2003; Ruettimann, 2011; Krohe, 2011). In general, a definition is either so broad that it becomes bland, or so narrowly focused that little of any practical significance can be drawn from it for the purposes of leading. However, we may reasonably state that Transactional leadership and the unitary paradigm no longer dominate the field.

There are myriad ways to study and interpret data relating to leadership in organizations. As Meyer said "Some who study organizations see broad patterns; others see a myriad of more narrowly defined problems and issues. This article portrays organization science as a dialectic wherein the former scholars synthesize regularities into integrative "umbrella constructs," which the latter cha-

llenge as too broad and inconsistent, playing the role of “validity police.” Tensions between rigor and relevance, and paradigms and pluralism are framed as by-products of a life cycle of scholarly constructs. (Meyer, A.D 1991, cited in Hirsch, P.M. and Levin, D.Z.[1999] p. 199).

We will attempt to use an “umbrella construct” but with a nod to some key problems and issues such as a supposed gender divide in leadership.

Arguably, in the post-GFC period of even more cut-throat competition and a renewed customer emphasis, a leadership style based on good communication, participation and team working has become much clearer to all (Simpson et al., 2010; Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). The traditional ‘masculine’ concept of management as consisting of ‘planning, ordering, directing and controlling’ has now given way to the need for cooperation, relationship building, and responsiveness to others. That is skills and attributes typically associated with femininity. Leadership has therefore become increasingly reflective of a feminine ethos. Rather than a weakness to be overcome and be ‘solved’, femininity is a newly recognized asset, and a potential advantage in the workplace (Simpson et al., 2010) and in digitally connected environments (Smith & Cockburn, 2013). Although researchers and the

popular press alike have lauded women as having the skills necessary for leadership in the twenty-first century (Eagly et al., 2003a/b), women often still come in second to men in competitions to attain leadership positions (Eagly, 2007).

Today therefore there is less explicit support for perceived gender differences in managing and leading. Thus, Andersen and Hansson (2011) wholeheartedly concur with this view, writing “Indeed, a halt would be judicious at this point, for it appears we have now come to the end of this road” (ibid p. 438). These authors further assert that female and male managers do not differ in task-oriented or people-oriented behavior, and they conclude that in regard to leadership in particular, none or only small and inconsistent differences in behavior exist. Support for the findings of Andersen and Hansson (2011) come from: the work of Trinidad and Normore (2005) who assert that women use the same stratagems for gaining influence that men use; the studies of Vecchio (2002, p. 647) who concluded that: “In short, the behavioral differences have been largely overstated”; and from the research of Oshagbemi and Gill (2003), who in their research of British managers found no gender differences in regard to directive, consultative, or participative leadership styles.

Many observers however see transformational leadership as the most appropriate leadership style for current conditions, irrespective of a leaders' gender. Transformational leadership may still involve other factors relevant to particular circumstances such as peoples' cognitive maps, leaders' charisma and trust, staff engagement and 'psychological contracts' (Avolio et al., 1996; Rousseau, 1995; Cheung & Wong, 2011). The new leaders should be transformational, including an organized search for change, which is critical if organizational learning is to occur (Jogulu, 2011). Birasnav et al. (2011) affirm that transformational leadership contributes to firm innovation, organizational learning, and employees' creativity skills (de Jong & Den Hartog, 2007; Aragon-Correa et al., 2007).

Walton's (2011) claims that the numbers of leadership-related titles in bookstores proves that the lure of the "heroic and grandiose" or charismatic leadership is still very much alive. However, he also points out, that the combination of a staunchly optimistic belief in leadership, and an accompanying reliance on such flamboyant leadership styles, create a toxic mix. He then cites a catalogue of high profile corporate transgressions since 2001, all attributed to high-flying executive blunders of one sort or another involving both male and female leaders (Gray et

al., 2005; Hamilton & Micklethwait, 2006).

Jogulu (2011) points to a complication related to charisma that involves a leader who is viewed as exceptional; such a gifted person will often hold back the collective learning of his/her individual followers. This is because the followers expect that the leader knows what is best in any given situation, and furthermore, that the leader has the overall knowledge to guide them to success.

Recently another aspect of the layperson's Charismatic, Heroic and Authoritarian leader stereotypes has come under scrutiny according to Zenger & Folkman:

Many people assume that it's possible for a person to be an effective leader without being likable. That is technically true, but you may not like the odds. In a study of 51,836 leaders, we found just 27 who were rated at the bottom quartile in terms of likability but in the top quartile in terms of overall leadership effectiveness — that's approximately one out of 2,000. (Zenger and Folkman, 2013)

Over time, there has grown broad-based dissatisfaction with the charismatic and autocratic styles of leadership (Collins, 2001; Tuomo, 2006). This has been exacerbated by the corporate scandals that caused the

demise of Enron (Tourish & Vatcha, 2005), and there is an increasing sensitivity to the “dark side of leadership” (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Kellerman, 2004; McIntosh & Rima, 2007; Higgs, 2009) that has been a neglected area until relatively recently, and also to “toxic leadership” (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Nevertheless the underlying leadership context often underestimates the different and somewhat conflicting worldviews of ‘Boomers’ and the ‘Gen Y’ demographic or seems out of touch with the globalized world. That is a world of cloud computing, viral marketing, ecological disasters, and emotional contagion of flash mobs using social media to self-organize a form of collective leadership. In the present day we do not have a stable commercial, social, political or technological world. On the contrary the world we experience has episodes of sudden and discontinuous change with an uncertain or unstable future outlook (Lovelock, 2006). Most organizations and leaders however continue to view the world of uncertainty and complexity as a threat (Brown, 2011; LMA, 2011).

II. WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT FROM LEADERS AND HOW CAN WE MEASURE THEIR PERFORMANCE?

Hannan and Freeman (1977) once argued that *all* the effectiveness cri-

teria were inappropriate for comparative studies of organisational effectiveness, which includes their leaders, of course. Further they stated that the only valid criterion for organizational success was sustainability or basically its survival. Others such as

Green and McCann (2011) and Benis and Goldsmith (2003) maintain that most people in organizations want a significant sense of purpose or direction from their leaders, together with action and results. People also want the ability to trust their leaders and they want them to be optimistic and have a clear vision of the future. Green and McCann (2011) also support the notion that effective leaders may differ in personalities, strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs, but they all have the ability to get the right things done at the right time (Drucker, 2001).

Our view is that in today’s globalized and digitally connected environments, most people will have roles that must reflect objectives based at times on ‘management’ and at other times on ‘leadership’ (Smith & Cockburn, 2013). Furthermore, in such distributed roles, as Spicker (2012) and Smith (2000) argue, leadership may be distributed across such a broad range of activities that anyone can exercise leadership whatever their role. In such a world, leading change is the key survival skill –

though frequently poorly understood or executed (Beer & Nohria, 2000).

Measuring success or failure is tricky and may vary over time and context. Thus according to Thomsett (2002), the Sydney Opera House was 16 times over budget and took four times longer to complete than originally planned, but is now seen as a success for the project leaders, for the country and has become a well-recognized world landmark building. At the time, from a project management and leadership perspective it was seen as a failure. On the other hand, the Millennium Dome in London, UK was built on time and on budget, but it was considered -in the eyes of much of the British media and critical public- as a failure because it did not deliver the anticipated 'awe and glamour that it was expected to generate (Cooke -Davies, 2001).

Consequently, as Argyris (1991) has argued, evaluating leadership performance and taking appropriate action is not so straightforward! An aspect of leadership recently highlighted by Pretorius and le Roux (2011) is "leadership failure" in relation to business collapse, but these authors explored leadership failure in the context of a company's upper and mid-level managers failing to achieve the respect of the managers they led. Pretorius and le Roux (2011) stress that middle managers are responsible for communicating and

managing to achieve targets set by senior managers. They set out seven categories of actions upon which managers reporting to the managers that lead them judge the successes or failures.

These authors also emphasize that leaders will be judged by what they *don't* do, rather than by what they do (Pretorius and le Roux, 2011). Gregory et al. (2011) support Pretorius and le Roux (2011) in that their study found that when leaders take the perspective of their followers, those followers tend to view the leader positively e.g. as being transformational. Similarly, Kaufman (2011) also suggests that leaders need to build their sphere of influence in order to be judged successful.

III. LEADERS' SELF-ESTEEM AND THE 'SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS'

Leadership roles can however, be a 'poisoned chalice' for the incumbents, followers and other stakeholders or communities. Two out of every five new CEOs fail within the first 18 months in the role according to Ciampa (2005). Organizations and their leaders are often advised therefore to manage their knowledge, be creative and think outside the box, learning from failures as well as from success. However, as Krohe (2011) notes "...The awkward truth is that while failure may teach

a company how to succeed, success often teaches a company to fail, by misleading it into thinking that it knows more than it does.”

In fact, around forty per cent or four out of every ten newly promoted managers and executives fail within 18 months of starting their new jobs (Vollhardt, 2005). This problem is sometimes exacerbated, by the founders of organizations often being unwilling (or not knowing when to) “let go” (Santora et al., 2011). That is, although some founders of organizations can remain active and contribute substantially to the continued growth and development of their organization even after their retirement, other founders, by remaining as active leaders but past their prime, may do irreparable harm to their organization and all its stakeholders (Temkin, 2009).

Overall, between half and three-quarters of leaders are not performing well and consequently their tenure is decreasing (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Vollhardt (2005) notes that the following types of executives experienced the highest failure rates within the crucial first 18 months: senior-level executives (39%), sales executives (30%), then marketing executives (25%), and operations executives (23%).

Leaders are under increasing scrutiny from multiple audiences and most

are becoming increasingly aware of this fact of life, especially in modern global business. Nowadays corporate leadership activity is increasingly geared towards inspiring trust and confidence among a multiplicity of investor types and creating a positive work environment for staff. La Rotta and Herrera (2011) explain that in global contexts, the strength of integral business transformation lies in the capability to continuously create, connect, and execute strategy throughout the entire business system. Leaders must be conscious of the repercussions from their role as context creators in which a customer/ employee emotional engagement occurs.

In order to survive in the field of corporate governance in the twenty-first century, CEOs increasingly have begun taking more account of the emotional regimes in the workplace and of the trust they must sustain with shareholders and executive boards, employees, unions and other stakeholders (Lucier, Wheeler and Habbel, 2007, p 2, pp11-12, Cockburn, 2007). Today goodwill and respect is an asset on balance sheets and one that pays dividends (KPMG, 2005)-but an asset that may rapidly depreciate if not adequately addressed. So the perceived esteem in which others hold leaders is likely to affect their self-esteem.

The global talent management company (DDI) research reported by

Newhall (2011), indicates that there has been little real improvement in leadership quality over the last decade since Marquardt (2000, p. 233) predicted the new century required different skills from the old one. This study also states that in relation to talent management practices, DDI's comprehensive survey of the attitudes of more than 12,000 organizational leaders and 1,800 HR professionals from across 74 countries found that only one in three leaders reported that their own quality of leadership was high, and only 18 percent of HR professionals reported strong bench strength to meet future business needs. Leaders rated themselves poorly, without the skills essential for future business, and as Newhall (2011) asserts, there must be a significant shift in the development of leaders-and consequently, of their self-esteem- if this trend is to be reversed.

There is much organisational and strategic learning needed. Ng (2011) emphasizes that a leader for the 21st century must possess the capacity to see the "big picture". This attribute requires strategic thinking like a good chess player planning several steps ahead (Ng, 2011). To paraphrase March and Simon (1958, p. 170), short-run adaptation corresponds to simple problem solving, whereas long-run adaptation is about an organization's strategic learning. Strategic learning refers then to how

organizations realize and enact long-run adaptation. Through strategic learning, organizations change the explicit procedural routines and tacit cognitive rules that govern their innovation process at the corporate level. In parallel some unlearning is needed. That is unlearning of out-of-date ideas, customs and practices of leaders and managers.

IV. COMMUNICATION, COMPLEXITY AND SHIFTING SANDS

As we've indicated elsewhere, complexity is a key feature of global business:

"The globalized world environment continues to evolve and converge on interconnectedness between people through social media and the web, and between organizations operating in networks i.e. in digitally connected environments. This evolution continues between disciplines that are the central feature, inducing much of the complex web of social and economic change enabled by rapid technological breakthroughs through the BNIC (Biotechnology Nanotechnology Information and Computing) or GRIN (Genetics, Robotics, Information and Nanotechnology) industries.

Sustained competitive success is now dependent on the effective and intentional management of the human and intellectual capital and ma-

terial resources, commitment, capability, and competence that reside within the whole supply chain, not just those that reside internally in any company.” (Smith and Cockburn, 2013, p 90)

A significant part of the communication systems, procedures and cognitive rules used in global organizations’ decision-making currently refer to what Yates and Orlikowski called electronic organizational communication ‘genres’. They describes these as follows (Yates, Orlikowski & Okamura, 1999, p. 83):

“Electronic communication, like other forms of organizational communication, can be classified into recognizable types, or *genres*” and further, “these genres, as organizing structures of a community, both shape and are shaped by individuals’ communicative actions.”

They stress a second strand suggesting that “...the use of a new electronic medium within a community is strongly influenced not just by users but also by those individuals who implement the technology, provide training, propose usage guide-lines, and alter the technology to adapt it to changing conditions of use. We call such action *technology-use mediation* (Okamura et al. 1994, Orlikowski et al. 1995), and posit that it critically influences the effectiveness of media use within a community,

both initially and over time. “ (Op cit, 1999, p. 83).

Such electronic genres have been expanded and have impacted across the socio-organization sphere with the burgeoning growth of mobile technologies and social media since the late 1990s when the article above was published and are now ubiquitous except in the most extreme or remote areas. We have picked up this topic as a chapter (chapter 10) and theme in our 2013 book (Smith & Cockburn, 2013) referring to socio-digital technologies and their perceived impacts on global business and leadership. This underscores the fact that there’s no simple, unmediated process to achieve successful leadership in complex, rapidly evolving, global business environments. This is the 24/7 Web 3.0 networked age of mobile telephony, lifelong / lifewide learning, ‘prosumers’ as well as consumers, all enabled by global collaborative technologies. Constructive collaboration is characterized by sharing knowledge and expertise widely, and it isn’t helped by excessive control, secretiveness, or selfishness.

A. Collaboration

The key to a collaborative work environment is that many individuals at *all levels* are responsible for achieving success.

The kinds of barriers that most frequently occur are:

- Lack of equitable incentives and rewards for all collaborators
- Restrictions on many contributors sharing in the rewards and recognition
- No transparency and candor in communication
- Insufficient employee input and utilization
- Limitations in effective allocation of resources
- Ineffective technology, legacy systems, bureaucratic processes and procedures

Somewhat paradoxically, another barrier to collaboration within or between teams or organizations may link to effective and/or exceptional leadership. That is a department's higher prestige may overshadow that of other departments making that department's employees feel like second-class citizens. A sense of inferiority tends to encourage lower engagement and limits the will of people to be sufficiently motivated to perform at their best.

Another common example of a potential barrier is that of employees not utilizing their full abilities be-

cause company history has taught them that going the extra mile is not rewarded. The rewards may not always be financial such as bonuses or visible ones such as being promoted. Templer et al. (2010) suggest that the power of financial rewards varies for different groups of employees. Constructive feedback, praise and coaching or mentoring may be sought. Such Feedback and development is most effective when it is delivered close to the praiseworthy acts. However, in many companies praise for efforts is left until the end of the year at annual performance reviews and thus is neither effective nor well delivered in such organizations. The latter issue is often linked to department or organizational culture and with the history and evolution of mismatched legacy of organizational technology, systems and procedures, each having little relationship to the others. However, it impacts negatively on innovation and co-innovation in companies (Von Stamm,2008).

B. Sustainability, Innovation and co-innovation in the global organizational ecosystem

Innovation, creativity and design are surely amongst the most frequently used words in business today, not least because excelling in these areas are widely acknowledged to be asso-

ciated with business success. (Von Stamm, B 2008, p. xi).

There is no doubt that effective leadership can play a key role in empowering employees to become creative, and innovative. For all firms operating on a global basis, in 2013, employee creativity and innovation is a vital focus during the global economic downturn.

The term innovation is widely used and it needs to be clarified what innovation really means. Innovation is defined variously as the implementation of new ideas at individual, group or organisation level and creativity has been defined by Shalley and Gilson (2004, p. 33-34) as “an outcome, which focuses on the production of new and useful ideas concerning products, services, processes and procedures.” Innovation is described as being a two-stage process of initiation and implementation (Jeroen and Deanne, 2007) and is in effect a series of behaviours.

Organizations of all kinds must increasingly take into account not only the simple bottom line of their organizational operations, but also address their sustainability in broader terms as some experts indicate.

We define innovation broadly as a new match between a need and a solution. The novelty can be in the solution or the need [...] successful

innovation creates value. In most commercial settings, this means that the innovation results in financial profits, but alternative notions of value such as social welfare or environmental protection may motivate innovation in other settings. (Terwiesch, 2009, p 3)

The uncertain result of an innovation can cause fear and “many struggle with realising it in their business, and translating it into everyday business.” (Von Stamm, B 2008, p. xi). Govindarajan pointed out that organizations are not designed for innovation; they are designed for ongoing operations.

Thus, as Smith and Cockburn (2013) state, implementing innovation is not easy:

An IBM survey involving over 750 CEOs of the world’s top commercial organizations (cited in Applegate, 2007) found that only 15% were successful in changing their organizations to become more innovative, and another 15% admitted to have little or no success. (Ibid, p. 202).

However, the actions taken in the past (and still preferred in some centralised businesses) to achieve innovation of consists of ‘top down’ approach with directives and targets given to project teams or establishment of matrix structures to try to pool knowledge and skills rather

than alternatives such as self-organising ‘communities of practice’ termed ‘communities of innovation’ by Coakes et al. (2011), experimentation, active feedback, co-evolution and emergence or action learning approaches (Mitleton-Kelly, 2011).

Espinosa and Porter (2011) support the conclusions reported by Mitleton-Kelly (2011) that in order to successfully implement a sustainability vision, leadership must shift from directing or dominating strategy to actively promoting and instituting conditions and processes involving learning “mechanisms,” “skills,” and “practices (Espinosa & Porter, 2011, p. 59). They suggest that there is no “one best way” for a company seeking to adopt a bottom up innovation strategy, but instead the strategy should be allowed to work through existing culture. This approach enables the self-organizing processes of emergence and co-evolution to work within established channels and customs in the organization.

CONCLUSIONS

The ICT and data analytics technologies at the start of the twenty-first century have generated new organizational forms and leader-challenges. These new wave organizations are flatter, networked, nimble, and operate globally by virtue of the technology available today. However,

even though innovative behaviour is very important in firms, it still receives little attention from academic researchers.

There are many ways both highly technologically dependent as well those are less technology-reliant by which leaders can empower and encourage employees to become creative, collaborative and innovative. De Jong found what he saw as thirteen key leadership behaviours that enable empowerment of followers. Goldsmith (2013) however makes the point that it is important to note that it is not possible for a leader alone to “empower” someone to be accountable and make good decisions. The people must empower themselves and management must encourage and support the decision-making environment the teams inhabit.

The leaders can empower employees in a few key ways. That is by devolving power to those who have demonstrated that they have the capacity to handle this, creating a favourable environment in which people are encouraged to voice their concerns and challenges openly, to grow their learning and these people discretion have a sensible level of discretion over their tasks and resources in the workplace.

The research we undertook for our recent book “Dynamic Leadership Models for Global Business-Enhanc-

cing Digitally Connected Environments” (Smith & Cockburn, 2013) established a sound basis for the development of successful leaders in complex digitally-connected global environments, and our book details both the research and the practicalities of our approach. Furthermore, it enabled us to establish a new Center for Dynamic leadership Models in Global Business (CDLMGB, 2012), based upon our integrated leadership model. The Center is staffed by a number of world experts and authorities in various disciplines. We see the models set out in our book as flexible and adaptable enough to robustly address leadership contingencies that emerge at all levels within and between global organizations and various stakeholder communities, and we see the Center in this regard as facilitating research and consulting globally.

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