



NORTH HARRIS MONTGOMERY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mary Schafer, Director of Student Information Services

FROM: Kelly Bricks, Veterans Services Advisor

DATE: July 2, 2012

SUBJECT: Intercultural Communication within the Business Environment

Here is the report you requested June 3 on intercultural communication within the business environment at North Harris Montgomery Community College District.

Statement of Problem

As mentioned in the research proposal for this project, over the past five years the enrollment at North Harris Montgomery Community College District has increased by more than 10,000 students. As school enrollment increases and district demographics change, it becomes increasingly important for our staff to communicate clearly with a more diverse student population.

Steps to Improvement

This increasingly diverse environment requires our staff to become competent in intercultural communication practices. North Harris Montgomery Community College District staff members need to learn effective communication skills to use during their interactions with students. This research paper will present steps our organization can take to improve our intercultural communication skills.

In addition to understanding the skills needed to improve intercultural communication practices at the college, I will also recommend areas for future training seminars. This ongoing training will help our staff learn to communicate effectively with everyone they come in contact with.

Thank you for the opportunity to work on such an important project. This research project has been very educational and provided me with a better view of communications within our organization. Please contact me if you have any questions regarding the information provided in this report.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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July 2, 2012

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study researches intercultural communication and the effects cultural differences have on business communication. The goal of this study is to teach our staff to communicate through cultural boundaries. By learning the importance of intercultural communications and skills to handle intercultural experiences, our staff will learn to effectively communicate with our diverse student population.

The following report explains intercultural communication, intercultural business communication competence and recommendations for improving intercultural business communication within the college district.

Intercultural communication describes the interaction between two people with different cultural backgrounds. These cultural differences create communication barriers, which influences the receiver's interpretation of the message. Culture not only influences the interpretation of the message, but can also influence the reaction to the message.

Individual cultures are based on cultural layers and dimensions which create an individuals beliefs and value system. These cultural layers and dimensions influence a communicator's behavior and reaction during communications.

In today's global economy, it's important for employees to be competent in intercultural business communication skills. Intercultural business communication competence requires employees to understand cultural differences and remain open-minded to new cultures and their differences.

Our increasingly diverse student population requires our staff to effectively communicate with students from varying backgrounds. To create an effective communication climate, intercultural business communication skills should be incorporated into our daily business practices. It's important that our staff learn to be competent in their intercultural business communications.

This research has provided me with a better understanding of the communication environment in our office. It is evident to me that our staff needs on-going training to increase our communication effectiveness, especially in regards to intercultural communications. Learning to use effective communication skills will help our staff avoid costly misunderstandings or conflicts.

By analyzing this research, I have compiled a list of training topics to include in our on-going business training. These training points will help our staff create a better communication environment for students and other staff members.

II. INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years enrollment at North Harris Montgomery Community College District has increased by more than 10,000 students. Figure 1 shows how the ethnicity distribution changed from spring 2006 to 2007.

STUDENT PROFILES - SPRING 2007		
ETHNICITY	DISTRICT TOTALS	PERCENT CHANGE SINCE SPRING 2006
White	23,234	0.0%
Black	5,484	0.8%
Hispanic	9,766	15.8%
Asian	2,924	11.3%
Other	3,614	20.0%

Figure 1. North Harris Montgomery Community College Student Profile

The percentage of change from spring 2006 to spring 2007 shows an increase in student populations from Hispanic, Asian and other cultures. As school enrollment increases and district demographics change, it becomes increasingly important for our staff to communicate clearly with a more diverse student population.

As a main requirement of our jobs, Student Information Services staff communicates with students on a daily basis about all aspects of school enrollment. Due to our constant contact with the student population, the staff would benefit from communication training with an emphasis on intercultural communications.

Intercultural communication training would teach our staff to communicate clearly across cultural barriers. This type of training would help us effectively communicate with students and staff from different cultural backgrounds.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

North Harris Montgomery Community College District has become one of the fastest growing community colleges in Texas. In 2006, the Houston metro area reached a population of more than five million people and became the sixth largest metropolitan area in the United States. According to the Greater Houston Partnership, Houston's population has increased by more than 25 percent since 2000.

Since 2006, Houston's minority populations steadily increased due to its proximity to Mexico and the relocation of New Orleans residents. "[Houston] gained 121,400 minority residents between July 2005 and July 2006," reported the Houston Chronicle on August 9, 2007.

ABC news in Houston reported in August 2007, that Houston's Hispanic and African American populations had increased substantially due to New Orleans residents relocating after Hurricane Katrina. "City officials estimate some 150,000 New Orleans residents migrated to the Houston metropolitan area in the months following Hurricane Katrina and that about 100,000, mostly black, remain," said ABC Houston. "Houston city officials view the move toward a multiracial, bilingual and economically global city as both a challenge and an opportunity."

This continuous increase in the Houston population has equaled a continuous increase in diversity throughout our college campuses. This new diversity among residents and students creates a need for intercultural communication training.

PURPOSE, SCOPE, AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study is to research intercultural communication and its effect on business communication. This research will help our staff identify cultural differences and learn to communicate effectively with different cultures. The main goal of this study is to teach our staff to communicate effectively with the increasingly diverse student population.

As a result of this research, I created training points to teach our staff about intercultural differences, business communication and effective intercultural communication skills for every business environment. This training will focus on recognizing cultural misconceptions, as well as intercultural communication techniques for intercultural communication in a business environment.

These training techniques can be incorporated into our on-going business training. By utilizing these training techniques, our staff will learn to effectively communicate in every communication experience. On-going communication training will benefit our staff by teaching cultural diversity, intercultural communication practices, intercultural conflict management and intercultural business communication. Hopefully, by incorporating intercultural communication training into our organizational environment, we can improve communication effectiveness between the student population and college staff.

SOURCES AND METHODS

In preparation for this report, I researched reference books and journals to find information about intercultural communication. This research included information about cultural differences and skills to use in intercultural communication experiences.

During my research, I found a lot of information to help us with our current communication problem. This information was used to create training techniques to teach the Student Information Services staff to effectively communicate with the student population.

REPORT ORGANIZATION

This report examines intercultural communication, intercultural business communication and possible training techniques to teach our staff the importance of effective intercultural communication practices.

III. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Before we learn how to handle intercultural experiences, we need to understand what intercultural communications means. The word culture refers to patterns in behavior and communication in humans. “Culture includes how people think – their beliefs, values, world view, and information processing,” said Carley H. Dodd (1998).

“Culture includes how people think – their beliefs, values, world view, and information processing,” said Carley H. Dodd (1998).

Intercultural communication is the interaction of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. According to J.L. Morrison and P.P. Morrison (1991), “intercultural communication is the process of a message interaction between two or more people in which a communication climate characterized by cultural differences influences the outcomes of the interaction.” Cultural differences determine the way a message is perceived. These differences create communication barriers for both the sender and receiver to overcome.

CULTURAL LAYERS

All people are influenced by a variety of cultures such as organizational, regional or national cultures. Each individual behaves in accordance with the views and beliefs of their cultural background. Their views and behavior are created by these layers of cultures. According to Andrew Targowski and Ali Metwalli (2003), individuals are made up of many different cultural layers which filter messages. The cultural layers which influence communication include: biological, personal, group, organizational, regional, national and global cultural layers.

In intercultural communication, the sender sends the message to the receiver through these cultural layers. Each cultural layer filters the message according to the values of that culture.

Figure 2 describes each of the cultural layers.

CULTURAL LAYERS	
CULTURAL LAYER	DEFINITION
Biological	This is the basic layer of culture, which determines an individual's reaction to physical needs. This layer is common to all cultures.
Personal	The personal culture layer defines how each individual survives and behaves in group, organizational, regional, national, and global cultures. Personal culture defines how the individual perceives space, time, things and people.
Group	Group culture is how employees, managers or family members know to accomplish goals within the group environment and to benefit the group. A group is a collection of individuals with a common goal.
Organizational	Organizational culture provides rules as a way to show employees how to behave in given circumstances. These rules dictate behavior and communication practices in the organizational environment.
Regional	Regional culture is made up of individuals with common interests based on a given region. Individuals within a regional culture view space, time, things and people in similar ways.
National	National culture provides a set of common behaviors (thinking, feeling and communicating) based on the values embraced by the nation as a whole.
Global	The Global layer is the newest layer because of the development of a global economy. Due to the global economy, people from different cultural backgrounds behave similarly in order to succeed in business.

Figure 2. Cultural Layers provided by Targowski & Metwalli, (2003)

DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

In addition to each cultural layer, there are dimensions of each culture which contribute to thoughts, feelings and behavioral patterns of individuals. The dimensions of culture influence concepts of time, procedures within a culture and communication style. Dodd (1998) explains that these dimensions of culture define an individual's thoughts and beliefs.

The first cultural dimension refers to the way cultures process time. Cultures are either monochronic or polychronic. Monochronic cultures believe it's important to do one thing at a time. A monochronic culture needs closure on a task before moving to the next one, said Dodd (1998). Alternately, polychronic cultures try to do multiple things at one

time. These differing views of the use of time can cause misunderstandings in a business environment. By understanding the way each culture accomplishes tasks, employees can learn to work together more efficiently.

Different cultures also have different expectations for behavior. According to Dodd (1998), “another way that cultures process information revolves around how much its members are expected to know about procedures and rules without being told.” High-context cultures require individuals to know how to behave without being told. In high-context cultures procedures and rules are implicit, but in low-context cultures the rules and procedures are explicit. Low-context cultures explain procedures and expectations to members so they behave correctly. These cultural differences can create miscommunication among people with a different understanding of how to behave.

Dodd (1998) uses Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions to explain other differences in cultures, which effect communication. Hofstede identified four factors which influence communication within cultures. These cultural factors include:

- Individualism-Collectivism
- Masculine-Feminine
- Power-Distance
- Uncertainty Avoidance

The first of Hofstede’s cultural factors, individualism-collectivism, refers to an individuals focus on either self or group needs. According to Dodd (1998), individualistic cultures are more concerned with personal achievement; whereas, collectivists are interdependent on the group. Collectivists are more concerned with the needs and goals of the group than with self achievement. In a work environment, it’s important to understand the goals of the organization and individuals personal goals, in order to clearly communicate with each other.

Hofstede also explained that masculine-feminine cultures differ in their communication strategies. Masculine cultures exhibit assertive and competitive behaviors. Feminine cultures exhibit affectionate and compassionate behaviors. These two cultures handle conflict in very different ways. “Masculine cultures tend to use more aggressive styles of communication,” said Dodd (1998). “Their problem-solving methods and conflict-management techniques would center around bottom-line issues, strict coping and debriefing information techniques.” Feminine cultures have more interpersonal relationships and pay more attention to non-verbal messages.

The power-distance index explains how different cultures accept inequality among individuals. According to Geert Hofstede, Emeritus Professor at Maastricht University, the power distance index “is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.” Cultures with a low power index are arranged horizontally where individuals are seen as equal; whereas, cultures with a high power index are more accepting of inequality.

The last of Hofstede's cultural dimensions is uncertainty avoidance. "[The uncertainty avoidance index] indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations," explains Hofstede. This cultural difference explains why some cultures need information and certainty, but other cultures are more comfortable dealing with uncertainty. According to Dodd (1998), "cultures that value avoiding uncertainty will probably exhibit more direct styles of communication."

These are a few of the cultural dimensions that influence the thoughts, feelings and behavioral patterns of individuals within the culture. These cultural dimensions determine how individuals behave and how they communicate with others. Learning to understand cultural dimensions and their effect on individuals can help people communicate clearly and overcome miscommunication.

IV. INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

In 2006, our enrollment soared to approximately 60,000 students, making North Harris Montgomery Community College District the fastest growing community college in Texas. Every year, as enrollment continues to increase, so does the diversity of our students. Spring 2007 enrollment showed an increase in student populations from Hispanic, Asian and other cultures.

"Every business communicator needs to know how to interact successfully with members of different cultures," said Arthur H. Bell and Dayle M. Smith in Management Communication (2006).

Everyday, staff members from Student Information Services communicate with a wide variety of students. Our ability to properly use intercultural business communication skills will benefit our staff as well as our students. "Every business communicator needs to know how to interact successfully with members of different cultures," said Arthur H. Bell and Dayle M. Smith in Management Communication. To effectively communicate with our diverse student population, we need to become competent intercultural business communicators.

INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Today's global economy creates a requirement for businesses to communicate effectively in intercultural environments. Alexei Matveev researched the meaning of intercultural communication competence. According to Matveev (2004), "An intercultural and communicatively competent member of a multicultural team establishes interpersonal relationships with other team members through effective and appropriate interaction." Matveev (2004) found that both American and Russian managers believe an effective member of an intercultural environment needs effective communication skills, cultural awareness and understanding, open-mindedness and nonjudgmental attitudes, and personal competence.

In his research, Matveev (2004) found that today's managers think effective communication skills are the most important requirement in employees. According to Matveev (2004), effective intercultural communicators have "the ability to interpret cultural differences, rephrasing and explaining messages so that they are understood by different cultures, possess good listening skills, asking questions, being observant of cultural clues, and being able to speak more than one language." In the global economy this ability to communicate clearly across cultural boundaries is vital to success in business.

Being able to communicate with other cultures is merely the first step. Employees need to be able to identify cultural differences and remain open-minded when faced with these differences. In Matveev's research (2004), cultural awareness and open-mindedness were essential to business success. By remaining open-minded, employees are open to new ideas and cultural differences. Matveev (2004) explains that in addition to intercultural communication skills, employees need to be intelligent because it shows professional competence and a broad range of knowledge.

"Virtually everyone in business will have business relations with a foreign company at some point," said Bell and Smith (2006). According to Matveev's research (2004), effective communication skills, cultural awareness and understanding, open-mindedness and nonjudgmental attitudes, and personal competence are required to be interculturally competent employees. These skills are essential to be successful in a global economy and multicultural environment.

RECOGNIZING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural communication competence means more than saying the right words. To truly be a competent communicator, it's important to utilize nonverbal communication skills to present your message as well. Communicating across cultures requires employees to understand cultural differences in nonverbal communications.

Obviously, people are more comfortable when communicating within their own culture; however, to be effective in today's business world it's important to clearly communicate with other cultures. According to Hillary Anger Elfenbein and Nalini Ambady (2003), "people are generally more accurate at judging emotions when the emotions are expressed by members of their own cultural group rather than by members of a different cultural group."

Clear communication requires not only verbal competence, but also knowledge of nonverbal communication skills. According to Dodd (1998), "93 percent of meaning in a conversation is conveyed nonverbally." Without a clear understanding of nonverbal communication skills, miscommunications are more likely to occur.

Nonverbal communication behaviors can be broken down into kinesics, proxemics, chronemics, sensorics, haptics and paralanguage. These nonverbal communication behaviors are described in Figure 3.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS		
NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR	DEFINITION	IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION
Kinesics	“The term kinesics refers to gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body positions, body movement, and forms of greeting and their relation to communication,” said Dodd (1998).	In different cultures body language means different things. Some gestures common to your culture may be taboo in other cultures and could create an uncomfortable communication environment.
Proxemics	Proxemics describes the space between people when they interact. According to Dodd (1998), proxemics includes “(1) fixed feature space (such as architecture and spacing of buildings), (2) semifixed features (such as seating arrangements and furniture arrangements), and (3) personal space.”	Different cultures have different standards for the space required in interactions. Some cultures are comfortable standing very close to their communication partner; whereas, other cultures require plenty of personal space.
Chronemics	Chronemics defines the perception of time within a culture. This aspect of nonverbal communication explains how individuals perceive and react to time.	Different views on time can cause miscommunication when interacting with different cultures. Some cultures require punctuality; others are more relaxed about time constraints.
Sensorics	“Sensorics indicates the communicative and perceptual functions of the human senses,” said Dodd (1998).	Senses can determine if an individual is comfortable in a communication setting. Some individuals are uncomfortable due to the sounds or smells of foreign environments.
Haptics	“Interculturally there are rules about touch governed by the culture and the gender of the interactants,” said Dodd (1998).	Some cultures use touch to convey meaning in their message; while others avoid touching each other during communication experiences.
Paralanguage	“Paralanguage is that set of audible sounds that accompany oral language to augment its meaning,” said Dodd (1998).	These nonverbal cues vary between cultures. Paralanguage doesn’t always translate to the same meaning in each culture.

Figure 3. Nonverbal Communication Behaviors provided by Dodd, (1998)

Since our staff regularly communicates with cultures foreign to our own, staff members need to understand these nonverbal signals. To avoid miscommunication, employees need to understand that not all nonverbal signals mean the same thing in every culture. To be truly competent, employees need to understand the importance of clear verbal and nonverbal communications.

In today’s society, the ability to communicate with foreign cultures is just as important as the ability to communicate properly within your own culture. According to Elfenbein and Ambady (2003), “if cross-cultural interactions are slightly less smooth than same-culture interactions, then misunderstandings can accumulate over time and make interpersonal relationships less satisfying.” For success in business, employees should learn to recognize cultural differences and practice skills to communicate across these communication boundaries.

V. IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Using our new understanding of intercultural communication, we can teach our employees to clearly communicate with the diverse student population. All staff members from Student Information Services should receive ongoing training to ensure we are clearly communicating with all the college staff and students.

These training classes should cover the information presented in this research and teach employees skills to effectively address intercultural communications. Employees should learn the importance of intercultural communication and the effects it can have on our work environment. Training classes should teach employees to communicate clearly using verbal and nonverbal communication skills. This type of training will help our staff achieve intercultural business communication competency.

CULTURAL MISCONCEPTIONS

Intercultural communications are frequently plagued by misconceptions about foreign cultures. Every culture has assumptions about other cultures. These misconceptions inhibit clear communication between cultures. Figure 4 explains common misconceptions in intercultural interactions.

CULTURAL MISCONCEPTIONS	
ASSUMPTION	TRUTH
Everyone is essentially like me.	All cultures have different beliefs and values. These differences in cultural backgrounds make people act and think differently.
Others lack my advantages.	Cultural differences aren’t deficiencies. Other cultures have advantages we don’t have and we have advantages

	they don't have.
All we have to do is just get together, and our differences won't matter.	Simply coming together doesn't mean your differences disappear. Rather than simply sharing space, cultures need to be understanding.
Don't worry, I speak the language.	Although learning a language does help you learn about a culture, it doesn't guarantee you know everything about that culture.
They'll see that I'm sincere.	Many cultures pay more attention to what you do rather than your intentions.
They have to respect my knowledge.	Some cultures put more faith in trust than they do in knowledge. Your knowledge might not mean anything until you have created a trusting relationship with that culture.
We're all interested in the bottom line.	In the American culture, we look for the bottom line; however, some other cultures focus more on the process than the bottom line.

Figure 4. Cultural Misconceptions provided by Bell and Smith, (2006)

Allowing these misconceptions to blur your opinion of other cultures inhibits clear communication. To ensure effective communications, each culture must set their assumptions aside and be willing to learn about each other.

CULTURAL HABITS

When you communicate with other cultures, don't assume they'll do all the work. As a communicator, you should meet the other communicator half way. Below are some steps you can take to aid the receiver's ability to understand the message.

- Don't use slang or idioms – By avoiding slang and idioms, you give your audience a better chance to fully understand your message. “For the sake of clear business dealings abroad, try to become aware of words and phrases that might be misunderstood,” said Bell and Smith (2006).
- Slow down – According to Bell and Smith (2006), the speaker should slow down their rate of speech to allow for the receiver to interpret the message. “Look directly at the person to whom you are speaking, so that he or she can see words as they form on your lips and notice your facial and hand gestures,” added Bell and Smith (2006).
- Comprehension – Make sure to ask the receiver if the message was clear. Don't assume nonverbal signals mean the receiver understands.

Following these steps will help when staff members are communicating with people from cultures foreign to them. It's important for staff members to pay attention to their own cultural habits rather than focusing on those of the other communicator.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Intercultural communication adds another variable to conflict resolution. Different cultures use different conflict resolution methods or behaviors. The cultural layers and dimensions of an individual determine how they will act in a conflict situation.

Handling conflict can be stressful within one culture, and even more so when dealing with cultural differences. According to Dudley Cahn and Ruth Abigail (2007), "There are six confrontation steps to move through as you confront another person."

1. First, identify your problem and your goal in resolving this conflict.
2. Tell the other person the two of you need to talk.
3. Explain your problem and goal to the other person.
4. Listen to the other person's point of view and respond in an understanding way.
5. Find a mutually agreeable solution to the problem.
6. At a later date, follow up to ensure the problem has been corrected.

(Dudley & Abigail, 2007)

Although these six steps aren't a fix all solution to any conflict, these steps do help to create a comfortable communication climate to resolve a conflict. When attempting to resolve a conflict between intercultural participants remember to take into consideration the cultural differences affecting each person's actions and beliefs.

TAKE AWAY POINTS

To effectively communicate with a variety of different cultures our staff members need to remember these important facts about intercultural communication:

1. Cultural Differences – It's important to be able to identify cultural differences. Staff members should be taught to identify cultural differences based on the information provided in this research. Intercultural communication experiences are an opportunity to learn something new rather than an experience to be feared.
2. New Experiences – Not all communication experiences are equal and not all people are the same. Staff members should learn to separate past experiences from new experiences. New cultures are foreign to you and shouldn't be handled in the same way as past experiences. Not all people are from the same cultural background as you. Don't assume everyone has the same beliefs and values you have.
3. Ethnocentrism – Ethnocentrism is the view that your culture is the right culture. It's an attitude of superiority to all other cultures. Ethnocentrism can cause miscommunication and uncomfortable communication climates. According to Dodd (1998), "People should work to emphasize areas of similarity with others

- and to the extent you can underscore commonality, generally the better the interpersonal relationships.” Rather than believing your culture is right, open your eyes to the ideas and beliefs of other cultures.
4. Tolerance – Every employee needs to be tolerant of other cultures. It’s important to learn to react appropriately to each new situation. When you face a culture foreign to you try to be open-minded and nonjudgmental. “Your intercultural counterparts will appreciate your attempts at being understanding rather than critical,” said Dodd (1998).
 5. Verbal vs. Nonverbal –According to Dodd (1998), “Discrepancies between the verbal and nonverbal send a mixed message that in the long run discredits you.” Discrepancies between verbal and nonverbal messages are more likely to confuse the receiver because the messages don’t correspond. Make sure your verbal and nonverbal messages are understood by the receiver.
 6. Dominant or Submissive – According to Dodd (1998), “Dominating can be harmful, if you are overly submissive, people may decide that you have nothing to contribute, a condition that leads to intercultural relationship demise.” Staff members shouldn’t be overly assertive or submissive. It’s important to find the right behavior for each communication encounter.
 7. Knowledge – Don’t pretend you know more about a culture than you really do. Make sure to ask questions if there is something you don’t understand about a culture.
 8. Make a Difference – While each employee learns skills to help them communicate with our multicultural student population, they should also help influence other staff members to use these skills as well. By passing on their new knowledge, staff members can teach others to communicate clearly across cultural boundaries.

VI. CONCLUSION

As our student population continues to increase, it becomes more important for our staff to clearly communicate with a wide variety of students from different cultural

“Intercultural communication involves making connections between different views of the world, whether between countries or between cultural groups within one country,” said Bell and Smith (2006).

backgrounds. “Intercultural communication involves making connections between different views of the world, whether between countries or between cultural groups within one country,” said Bell and Smith (2006). To effectively communicate over cultural boundaries, people should use effective communication skills and remain open-minded to new ideas and people.

By including intercultural communication skills into our on-going training, we can help our staff members learn to effectively communicate in every situation. This training will not only teach us how to communicate with students, but also how to communicate with staff members. Effective intercultural communication skills will benefit our staff and more importantly our students.

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