

# **Workplace And Campus Violence: The Challenge To “Connect The Dots”**

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## **Introduction**

Workplace or campus violence typically conjures images of mass murder by disgruntled employees or students. Although rare, the potential for these catastrophes cannot be ignored, and the disruption otherwise caused by threat scenarios is common and costly. Homicidal violence in the workplace gained notoriety in the 1980s with a series of shootings at US Postal Service sites and various other and diverse workplaces. Although other campus incidents preceded it, the horrific rampage shootings by a psychotic, vengeful student at Virginia Tech in 2007 was a turning point for college administrators, leaving none unaware of the need to protect their institutions of higher learning. In the aftermath the state’s governor commissioned the Virginia Tech Review Panel to investigate the incident and make recommendations. Among the panel’s findings was that various departments, agencies, and key professionals who had contact with the perpetrator, Seung-Hui Cho, failed to communicate and collaborate with each other as serious warning signs of violence emerged during the months and weeks leading up to the murder of 32 members of the campus. “Passivity” characterized the institution’s reactions, as well as confusion about privacy and other laws. As the panel stated, “No one knew all the information and no one connected all the dots” (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007).

This is a common finding in such inquiries – a sense of risk being present, but no knowledge-based, multi-faceted and pro-active protocol in place to identify, assess, and respond to individuals of concern. In fairness, campus officials are faced with many competing priorities in the midst of increasingly stretched resources, making the maintenance of programs to prevent low probability catastrophic events as challenging as ever.

Workplace violence and similar public tragedies have spurred a great deal of study and research over the last two to three decades. Much has been learned about individuals at risk for these forms of violence, how to identify them early enough, and the organizational contexts and triggering events that contribute to workplace and campus violence. Multi-disciplinary “threat management” models have emerged to mitigate harm and related issues.

The remarks in this document pertain primarily to assessing and managing the risk of workplace violence, but much of it, as noted, is directly relevant to issues of

campus violence and students at risk. The author's perspective is that of a psychologist who conducts workplace risk assessments, collaborating with employer multi-disciplinary threat management teams.

### **Definitions, Statistics, and Motives**

Definitions of workplace violence include other forms of aggression besides homicide, and a range of severity: threats, yelling and angry outbursts, bizarre communications, bullying, stalking, assaults, sabotage, disturbing cyber activity, and property damage. Other impacts of workplace violence besides death and physical harm include fear and trauma, disruption and lost productivity, and employer or institutional liability.

The U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) distinguishes four categories of workplace violence: violence by strangers, violence by customers or clients, violence by co-workers, and violence by personal relations. Homicide in the workplace has never been an "epidemic" as some accounts have portrayed it. Workplace violent crime declined 44% from 1993 to 1999, as compared to a 40% decrease in the overall rate of violent crime. Although 7,062 people were murdered at work between 1997 and 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008), homicides represent less than 1% of all workplace violent crimes. Assaults are much more frequent. Simple and aggravated assaults account for 94% of workplace victimization, and rape and sexual assault account for 2% (Duhart, 2001). Those most at risk for assault include law enforcement officers, mental health workers, and sales employees. From 2000 to 2006 the annual number of workplace homicides from all causes declined slightly each year, from 677 in 2000, to 516 in 2006. However, in 2007 the number rose to 610 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

Two broad categories of workplace homicide exist from the perspective of the perpetrator's motive. The first, and statistically more common, accounting for 5,439 victims or 77% of the total between 1997 and 2007 is violence associated with the commission of other crimes, usually robbery (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Typically committed by offenders who are *strangers* to the victims, and motivated for profit, these crimes occur in cash-transaction businesses and work settings with high exposure to the public. This also includes most fatalities of law enforcement personnel.

The second category of homicidal violence – and the subject of this document – is acts motivated primarily by revenge. These incidents stem from real or perceived disputes, personal rejections, job and other losses, strongly held grudges, or extreme beliefs and attractions rooted in mental illness. Increasingly referred to as *targeted violence*, a term coined by the behavioral scientists of the US Secret Service (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999), these acts accounted for 1,623 homicide victims between 1997 and 2007, or 23% of the total. In 2007 there were 178 victims, or 30% of the total in this category. The perpetrators are usually employees, former employees, adult students, domestic or intimate partners of employees or students, acquaintances, clients, patients,

or other individuals outside the workplace or campus who most often have a real or *perceived* relationship with someone inside the organization. Perpetrators are predominantly males. Understanding what motivates these acts, and in general, what is at stake from the perspective of the individual making or posing a threat of violence, is helpful to threat management teams navigating cases.

Broadly speaking, targeted workplace violence often begins with a felt grievance or sense of being wronged, and the perpetrator escalating up a “pathway to violence” to achieve his or her definition of justice (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; White & Meloy, 2007). These individuals usually perceive themselves as victims and that non-violent alternatives to differences are not available, not satisfactory, or untrustworthy. Violence as an alternative is rationalized and may psychologically serve to diminish intolerable feelings of shame and powerlessness. A setback such as a job termination, academic failure, or rejection by an intimate partner may also trigger these feelings and the subsequent violence in an at-risk individual. At such a juncture the person may feel that he or she cannot passively withdraw without “losing face” to a catastrophic degree. These perpetrators more or less lack the capacity for feelings that would inhibit violence: empathy, guilt, love, gratitude, or concern for what happens to them and others. They are often noteworthy for their striking sense of entitlement, and relative inability to grieve and integrate losses and disappointments. Rather, they convert feelings of pain, sadness, powerlessness, and shame to rage. This rage fuels a *decision* to take violent action, but is unlikely to be felt at the moment of the violence, as the attacks are planned and not impulsive (White & Meloy, 2007).

Clinically speaking the violence may be understood as rooted in an extreme sensitivity to *narcissistic injury* – a felt insult to one’s sense of self or identity. Such a wound goes beyond the normal range of angry feelings experienced by more resilient employees or students following a job or career setback (Feldmann & Johnson, 1996). Angry remarks such as, “This job is my whole life”, or, “I’ve given you everything!” may be rooted in this deeply felt position. A student may believe he has no future as a professional, now “destroyed” by the committee rejecting his graduate thesis. Perpetrators are willing to sacrifice their physical self to preserve their psychological self and thus have the last word, and the ultimate, destructive control over despised or envied others.

In approximately half the cases delusional or paranoid psychotic states provide the primary motivation to attack one’s perceived persecutors, or are at least contributory. Depression and its accompanying hopelessness may also play a major role. Suicide at the conclusion of a workplace or campus mass murder is more typical than not, either directly or in a suicide-by-cop scenario. Inherent in a perpetrator’s thinking is a “nothing to lose” mindset. For angry, despairing, socially excluded individuals, death may be welcome if it brings fame, power and “payback” for rejection and humiliation (Mullen, 2004). Perpetrators who survive most often surrender without concern for escape, nor attempting to deny their culpability.

## **Risk Factors for Workplace Violence**

Although the most salient risk factors for workplace targeted violence have been identified (White & Meloy, 2007), this does not translate into a static “profile” of the potentially violent employee. Most cases raising concern about homicide risk are false positives: many individuals who make threats and reveal other warning sign and violence risk factors will never advance along the “pathway” to pre-attack planning and climactic attacks. Others with various issues relating to hypersensitivity and poor self-control may engage in impulsive displays of aggression, such as temper outbursts, throwing objects, and yelling. However less serious in appearance, these too should be appropriately addressed.

Based on their review of the research and literature, White and Meloy (2007) identified the risk factors for workplace homicidal targeted violence and organized them into the first “structured guide” for professionals conducting workplace violence risk assessments. This instrument, the WAVR-21 (Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk) consists of a 21-item coding grid for organizing case information toward reaching judgments of violence risk. The state of the science does not suggest that risk factors be added together in some quantitative or actuarial probability of risk. Judgment is still necessary and grows with experience. Some scenarios are easily dismissible as posing no or little risk, while a small subset can readily be seen as very serious by any observer. A variety of problematic cases exist in between these end points. Useful questions that may guide an initial inquiry include:

- What is the subject doing or saying that raises concern about violence?
- What is an apparent explanation for the subject’s behavior? (his “grievance”, motive, goal, problematic or bizarre thinking or perceptions, etc.)
- To what extent does the subject see violence as a means to resolve his or her situation?
- Does he or she have the weapons/means and capacity to act violently?
- What might trigger him or her to be violent?
- What actions might reduce the likelihood of violence?
- What information should be pursued, how and by whom?

Threat management teams should have a comprehensive but practical format for identifying potentially dangerous cases. For instance, a shorter version of the WAVR-21, free of technical and mental health jargon, may be used by non-clinicians on threat management teams to better organize their data, screen cases for violence risk, and communicate with risk assessment professionals. The WAVR-21 Short Form consists of 12 risk parameters that spell the acronym “Violence Risk”. Their descriptions follow:

**V: Violence Preoccupation:** Reveals violent ideas, fantasies; identification with violent perpetrators; sees violence as justified.

**I: Intent and Threats:** Expressed intentions, threats, motives, or plans to harm others or self (spoken, written, electronic, gestures, symbols)

**O: Others are Concerned:** Concern or fear exists among potential targets or those who know the subject that he or she may act violently.

**L: Losses Recent or Impending:** Recent or likely job or other significant loss: relationship, financial, status, family or significant-other death; school failure; strong denial or poor coping with losses.

**E: Entitlement and Negative Attitudes:** Very self-centered, defensive, or demanding; lacks any concern for and/or blames others; habitual lying; perceives management or other's position as "great injustice" to self.

**N: Non-compliant or Menacing Behaviors:** stalking, harassment, bullying, vindictive actions; security breaches; defiance of workplace rules.

**C: Capacity and Actions Preparatory for Violence:** First interest in or additional acquisition of weapons in troubled context; increased practice or planning behaviors; weapons at worksite; has or seeks access to targets.

**E: Extreme Moods:** Angry outbursts; very gloomy or agitated; extreme or sudden mood swings; suicidal feelings; notable isolation.

**R: Real Provocations or Destabilizers:** Situational factors, such as others in or out of workplace are provoking or supporting subject's volatility; highly stressful workplace; insufficient management attention to risk potential.

**I: Irrational Thinking:** Bizarre or highly suspicious beliefs, especially if they include violent ideas or fears of violence; makes highly irrational accusations, especially toward management or coworkers.

**S: Substance Abuse:** Use of amphetamines or other stimulants; abuse of alcohol; evidence of misconduct or violence while under influence.

**K: Known History of Violence, Criminality, or Conflict:** Violent history, especially if recent or frequent, including domestic/intimate partner violence; pattern of litigiousness or persistent conflict, especially in work contexts.

### **Who Should Assess Violence Risk?**

There is no clear line between non-professional and "expert" risk assessment. With practice threat team members from any discipline can become relatively adept at sorting through risk scenarios, gaining confidence through experience. This essentially serves as a screening function, so that serious cases do not "fall through the cracks", and that inordinate time and resources are not wasted on much less serious matters. Prudent is that everyone engaged in this endeavor, including the "experts", remember this tenet: "When in doubt, confer." Clinical risk assessment specialists are particularly helpful

evaluating complex cases, especially those involving subjects with mental disorders, including personality disorders – individuals whose behavioral patterns, defenses and reactions are particularly troublesome and confusing to interveners and administrators. Employers may also want a formal assessment process and expert opinion to strengthen the basis for any violence-risk related employment status decisions.

At times an employer may request a “fitness for duty” exam when what they are actually referring to is a violence risk assessment. A risk assessment conducted by a qualified mental health professional is not the equivalent of a fitness for duty examination. The latter, conducted by a professional with different technical qualifications, attempts to evaluate the impact of clinical conditions on job-related functioning, and whether an employee is fit to perform the essential functions of his or her job, with or without an accommodation.

### **Prevention Strategies**

As previously stated, workplace or campus targeted violence is foreseeable and preventable in the vast majority of cases. A violence prevention program reduces denial as well as dampens panic, and the tendency toward counterproductive responses. Embedded in the program, along with a policy and training for supervisors and employees to promote awareness and reporting expectations, should be a rational threat assessment protocol. This consists of:

- 1.) A data driven process of assessing the risk of violence posed by a subject to a particular targeted individual, group, or place, and
- 2.) Intervention strategies for interrupting or defusing escalation, reducing risk, target hardening and security measures, redirecting management focus for non-risk situations, and managing the anxiety and disruption of involved others.

Interventions may be viewed as falling along a continuum, from more confrontational, e.g., civil protective orders, detention and arrest, and involuntary hospitalizations, to (and more frequent by practice and advisability) “softer”, less confrontational strategies, such as defusing and problem solving conversations, benevolent severance agreements, and facilitating the disturbed and willing individual to get professional help. Not responding to certain threat scenarios, at least initially (and usually involving a non-employee subject), is also recognized as a strategic option.

A core principle in responding to a possible risk is striving to protect the individual’s stability and fragile sense of dignity so he or she is less motivated to act out. A sample case management flow chart is shown in Figure 1. It indicates various response options, all of which require discussion as to the pros and cons of their application in a particular case (The author provided an adaptation of this graphic to the American Society of Industrial Security for their online document, “Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Guideline.” The ASIS document may be retrieved at [www.asisonline.org/guidelines/guidelines.htm](http://www.asisonline.org/guidelines/guidelines.htm).)

## Sample Threat Management Reporting and Response Process

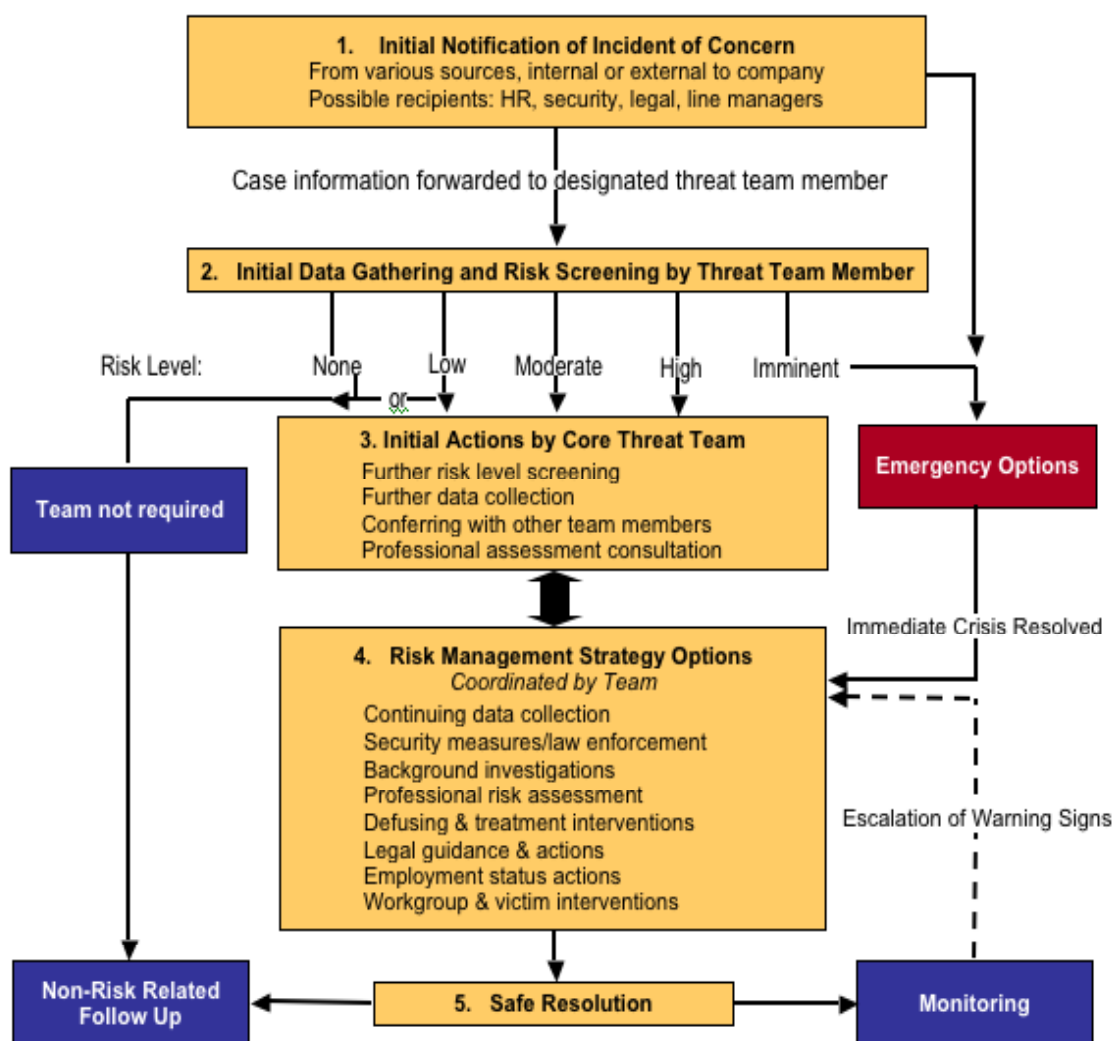


Figure 1

### Multi-disciplinary Teams

Multi-disciplinary incident management teams typically consist of security, human resource, and legal professionals, and with links to assessment professionals and law enforcement. Depending on the organization, others may be included, such as on-campus law enforcement, mental health professionals or ombuds persons.

Teams should be trained to investigate and manage cases to resolution, with a genuine spirit of collaboration, and the readiness and flexibility to import the skill sets and expertise they do not possess internally. Regular practice – with case vignettes,

tabletop exercises, and debriefing their own cases and responses – is the most productive way for teams to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. Such drills and reviews also make evident the dynamic interplay of assessment, safety, legal, communication, and other strategic issues typical of cases, and the degree to which the exercise of judgment and balancing obligations are a core necessity for successful teams. A “cookbook” approach to threat management does not work, especially as cases become more complex.

Crucial to case management success is that the incident management team members stay in control of the process of data gathering and intervention to the point of resolution. Crucial to program success is guarding against denial. Any of the invested parties are susceptible to the human tendency to assume a more comfortable, and less time-consuming position, whether conscious or not, of, “No news is good news.” Losing threat management team members through reassignment and shifting employer priorities may also threaten program success. In the current and foreseeable future of very difficult economic times, employers and administrators must be efficient in their efforts to identify and screen cases, but avoid dangerous shortcuts.

A common temptation in responding to threat scenarios is to “assess” them only superficially, and to quickly distance the threatening employee from the organization – that is, to summarily terminate him or her. Such reactions may be understandable, and more than likely justifiable from a misconduct standpoint. But hasty measures fail to recognize the potential such actions possess as humiliating *trigger events* for the at-risk individual – someone harboring strong resentments who is “looking for an excuse” to act on violent impulses. This is not to argue against separation from the organization when justified, but that the process of managing an individual of concern be guided by an ongoing assessment and safety-first strategy. Seasoned threat management professionals are aware of the “intervention dilemma”: any response intended to prevent violence can, in fact, have three possible outcomes. It may deter violence, have no effect on whether an individual acts violently or not, or it can increase the possibility of violence.

Intervention strategies should be based on the best assessment information attainable at the time, however incomplete it may be. It is not always possible, and at times neither necessary nor advisable to conduct a formal clinical risk assessment of a subject of concern. But a team should have available to it an experienced threat assessment professional, and one who is familiar with organizational dynamics and culture, workplace investigative processes, and the relevance of employment law and other legal considerations.

### **The Legal Context for Workplace Threat Management**

Workplace violence risk management must and can be conducted within a framework of legal requirements and any constraints imposed by applicable employer policies or guidelines. A discussion of legal issues falls outside the scope of this document. Suffice to say, during the incident management process, team members



typically will find themselves needing to navigate through significant legal issues. As they address the employer's primary obligation to maintain a safe workplace, responders must be mindful of the need for due process, and to evaluate issues of privacy, discrimination, and protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act that will commonly occur in assessing and resolving threat scenarios.

Threat management teams require legal consultation and participation. Ideally, especially for large employers and organizations who have a higher frequency of incidents of concern, the employer designates a legal representative to be an active member of its incident management team. That representative should know the other team members, the expertise they offer, and recognize the advantages of multi-disciplinary collaboration in threat assessment and threat management.

### **Case Example**

The following case example illustrates the potential issues, strategic choices, and multidisciplinary interplay in threat management practice.

A female employee comes forward to HR, with great anxiety and fear, and states that she has been having an affair with her manager. The manager is married and his subordinate is trying to get out of their intimate relationship. He has threatened her that, "If I can't have you, nobody can." She states she knows he has firearms, and has physically abused his wife in the past. Some of the coworkers in the workgroup are aware of the personal relationship between the two. Some fear for her safety as well as their own, and some resent her for their perception of "favors" the manager has extended her. The manager is rumored to be a "bully" who may have driven his previous boss to quit, and who has never been consistently disciplined. The woman states, "He told me if he loses his job over this, he'll kill me. He'll have nothing left. Please don't tell him I came forward. He uses drugs and I think his life is falling apart. I hope I don't lose *my* job over this."

The case is obviously complicated and raises a host of safety, legal, and HR issues. Warning signs of violence risk are more than apparent (or at least alleged). The woman's report raises two common challenges: she doesn't want to be identified, and she fears that any action the employer takes will trigger the manager to respond violently. But something must be done and a knowledgeable team would convene promptly.

An investigation must be conducted, safety and security being assured along the way. The team must sufficiently evaluate the risk and monitor for changes in the manager and others who might provoke him (targeted violence risk assessment is an ongoing, *dynamic* process). Sensitive information must be managed, and obligations balanced. Initial and continuing discussions will be necessary as the team considers its next steps. Managers responsible for the involved employees would typically be apprised of the safety concern and investigation being undertaken (as well as interviewed for

relevant information they may have).

Important to understand is that the terrified and embarrassed employee is privy to a great deal of information that will be helpful in assessing the risk to her and others in the workplace. It is prudent that a skilled and respectful team member or a risk assessment professional (or both) interview her. She should be expected to cooperate with any safety investigation. Assuming she does, the team should strive for a collaborative relationship with her, and avoid increasing her feelings of shame and self-blame. She most likely will need to be removed from the workplace for an unspecified period of time, for her safety and to reduce her anxiety. A difficult issue is how much responsibility to assume for her safety. Should it just be at the workplace, or after hours and in non-work settings? (These points would also generally apply to an employee who was being threatened by her disgruntled ex-spouse or partner, an outsider who was focusing on her workplace and threatening to do harm to her or others who worked there.)

Coworkers as well have useful information, but witnesses may fear retaliation by their manager, physical or otherwise. How communications are framed to involved-others is also a sensitive matter, where privacy is balanced with legal or ethical duties to warn and protect.

At the center of the case is the manager and whether he poses an actual risk of violence, now or at some other point in time. At the proper time, depending on the apparent urgency of the case, and after developing pertinent collateral information, he would ideally be directly assessed for violence risk; his threats are considered to reveal possible intent (the ultimate risk factor) by credible informants. He is also entitled to his “day in court,” and an assessment professional would absolutely want to hear the manager’s version of the facts, his point of view, and perspective on the various allegations. Individuals-of-concern may lie, deny, and minimize, but they always reveal themselves in clinical evaluations. Sometimes there are surprises and/or individuals are being scapegoated. As in any inquiry, the better the information, the more informed the employer’s decisions, especially when safety is the foremost concern.

Important assessment questions would include, among others: Do his threats indicate intent, or are they just more bullying or attempts to control the woman? What does he perceive he has to lose? Does he have a history of violence, and of what nature? Should a background investigation of his criminal and civil records be conducted? Can he see a positive future beyond his current job? What are any buffers that would suggest risk mitigation, such as his seeking legal help? Can he leave and save face? Are security measures and protective orders advisable and/or necessary in this case? How would his alleged substance abuse and mood states influence his being violent? These are only some of the questions and strategic options that a threat team would consider. Assuming the female employee to be credible and that the manager is judged to have engaged in serious misconduct, it is highly unlikely he would remain an employee, but his departure must be handled delicately as well as firmly.

Legal input is essential throughout this process that is otherwise largely informed by knowledge of the motives, thinking, perceptions, and behavior of individuals who may or may not pose a violence risk to a workplace. Dynamic threat management has many success stories. For those with the temperament and passion to engage in it – and a proper attitude of humility – the outcomes can be very gratifying. Supportive policies, campus awareness, training, teams in place, and protocols for the variety of possibilities will allow employers to “connect the dots”, early and effectively. Among the results are safety, comfort, and fairness in the workplace.

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