



LORETTA STAGNITTO™
LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES

PLAYBOOK FOR
Difficult Conversations
in the Workplace

WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

Introduction

As a leader, there's no doubt you regularly face conversations you would rather not have, and likely even spend precious time and energy contemplating whether or not you actually should have them. Yet, difficult conversations are a reality of life, whether stemming from our worklife, personal life or other ways we engage our lives in the world. A difficult conversation is anything we find challenging or uncomfortable to talk about, and so we avoid or delay doing so.

That's normal, of course, because whether it's in our work or personal lives, the outcomes to the conversations can be unpredictable, or the stakes are high, and we feel vulnerable and unsure, wondering if bringing it up will make the situation better or worse. How will the other party react?



The need for difficult conversations come up all the time in our day-to-day business interactions, and in personal matters. These are conversations where our thoughts, feelings and perceptions about certain issues are in conflict with others. And if we engage in them successfully, they are the mark of healthy relationships, as well as effective and authentic leadership.

Handling difficult conversations more productively, especially if you are a leader who regularly avoids conflict or doesn't have a high tolerance for working through it, is a MUST HAVE skill today for ongoing leadership success.

This e-book was created based on an interactive workshop by Loretta Stagnitto that incorporates and builds on the concepts and recommendations from the New York Times Business Bestseller ***Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*** by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Loretta believes that knowing the **What**, **Why** and **How** for “discussing what matters most” is fundamental for leaders, because they are constantly challenged to balance sharing their feelings and vulnerabilities while remaining decisive, strong, and emotionally self-disciplined.

As Stone, Patton, and Heen put it:

“

Difficult conversations do not just involve feelings. They are at their very core about feelings. Feelings are not some noisy by-product of engaging in difficult talk. They are an integral part of the conflict.

Understanding Difficult Conversations

WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

A difficult conversation is any interaction that creates anxiety due to its sensitive or challenging nature.

Examples include:

- Asking for a raise
- Raising sensitive issues
- Ending a relationship
- Providing critical feedback or performance reviews
- Saying no to someone in need
- Addressing disrespectful or hurtful behavior
- Disagreeing with the majority in a group
- Asking for help
- Apologizing



These conversations often carry significant emotional weight and can have profound implications on relationships and professional dynamics.

Why We Sometimes Find Conversations Difficult

WHY DO WE FIND HAVING THESE CONVERSATIONS TO BE CHALLENGING?

Three primary conversations often run through our minds when we are ruminating about having to have a difficult conversation:

- 1 **The “What Happened?” Conversation** – Reflecting on the events leading up to the conversation.
- 2 **The “Identity” Conversation** – Concern about how we are perceived by others.
- 3 **The “Feelings” Conversation** – Processing our own feelings and emotions.

These factors contribute to why we often hesitate to engage in difficult conversations.

Painful Feelings at Play:

Frustration, hurt, anger, anxiety

Our Self-Perception is at Stake:

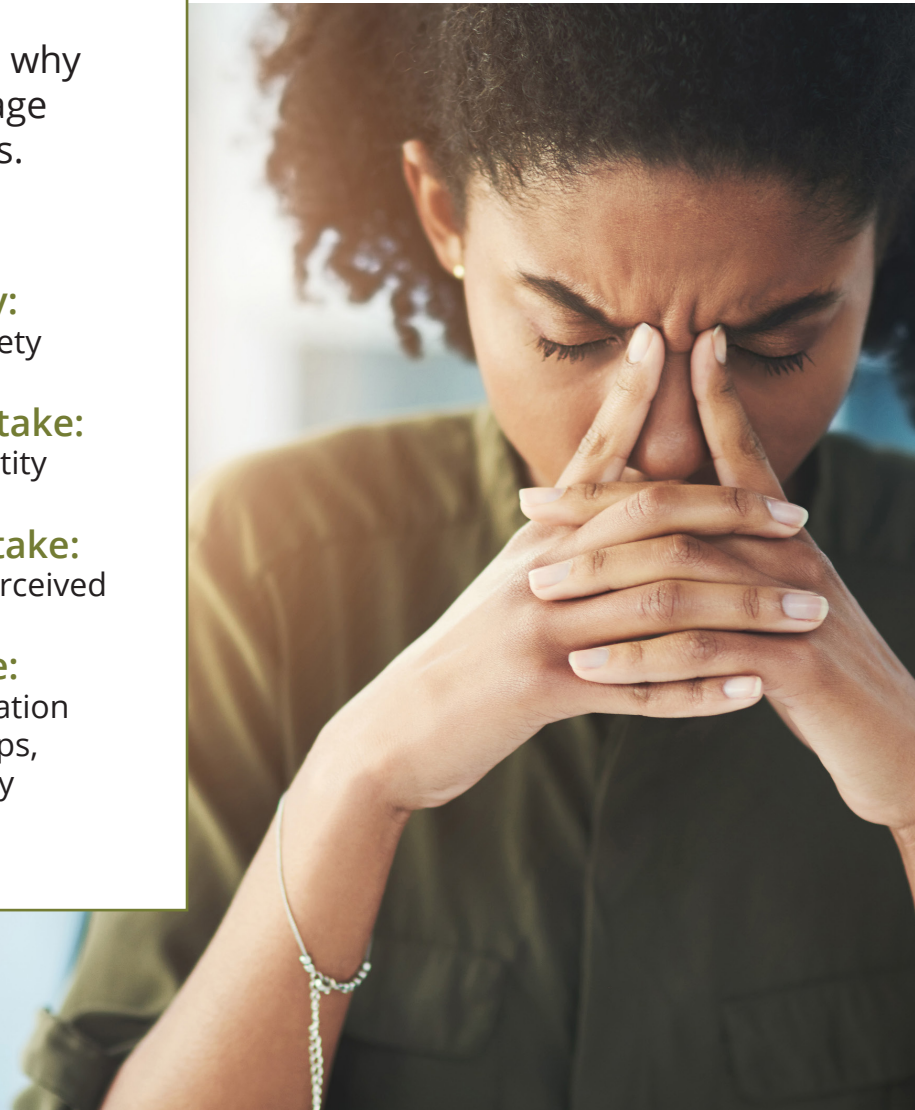
Self-worth, competence, identity

How Others See Us is at Stake:

Concern about how we will be perceived

Fears About the Future:

Worries about making the situation worse, damaging relationships, or impacting career security



Why Our Approach Impacts Our Actions

To navigate difficult conversations successfully, we must rethink our approach. These six areas can help shift from fearing and avoiding difficult conversations to handling them with confidence:

1 WHY DON'T WE HAVE THEM?

Common reasons include:

- Fear of What Others Think (FOWOT)
- Inability to Control the Outcome
- Projecting Our Discomfort onto Others
- Perception that the Pain is Less in Avoidance
- Real or Perceived Risks and Consequences
- Emotional Triggers and Personalization
- Family Patterns and Learned Conflict Responses
- Not Wanting Responsibility for Others' Experience or Reactions

Recognize that emotional and psychological resistance to difficult conversations is real and valid.

2 WHY DO WE NEED TO HAVE THEM?

While avoiding difficult conversations might seem easier, it comes with fixed costs. On the other hand, engaging in these conversations offers benefits, such as:

- Opening Channels of Communication
- Preventing Resentments from Escalating
- Reducing Stress
- Boosting Confidence and Self-Awareness
- Regaining Control Over Your Life
- Strengthening Relationships
- Preparing for Turbulent Times
- Advocating for Yourself
- Eliminating Misunderstandings

In the workplace, these conversations can significantly impact the future of your organization, team, and relationships.

How you raise them can affect the outcomes you get.

3

WHY UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS IS CRUCIAL

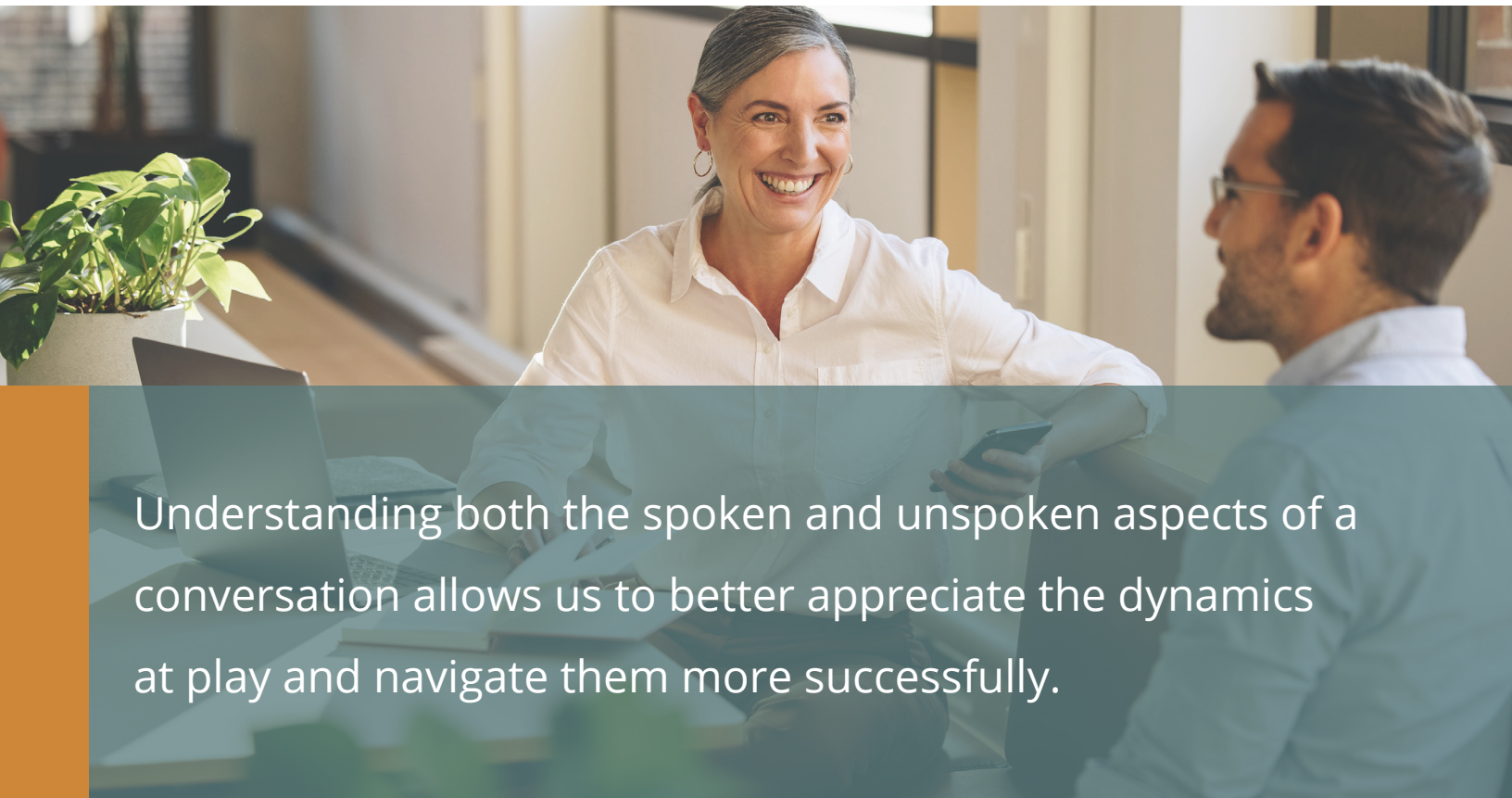
To truly understand difficult conversations, it's essential to consider both the spoken and unspoken thoughts and feelings involved.

The External Voice:

- Person A: "How's it going?"
- Person B: "I'm fine, thanks!"

The Internal Voice:

- Person A: "How is the project going?"
- Person B: "Like you really care..."



Understanding both the spoken and unspoken aspects of a conversation allows us to better appreciate the dynamics at play and navigate them more successfully.

3 Internal Shifts you can make to bridge the gap between the spoken and unspoken:

- **Share Your Thoughts** – If appropriate.
- **Stop Negative Thoughts** – If they're unhelpful.
- **Negotiate with Yourself** – If stopping isn't realistic.

How To Better Engage In A Difficult Conversation

1 ANALYZE THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURE.

When approaching a difficult conversation, it's important to first think about it from different perspectives, moving from "I know all I need to know", and "I'm right" to "The other has a perspective that I don't fully know or understand, since I can't read their mind. For example:

Self-Focused Mindset:

- **Facts:** Who's right? (I'm right)
- **Blame:** Who's at fault? (It's your fault)
- **Intent:** I know what you're like.
- **Feelings:** What do I do with these strong emotions?
- **Identity:** What does this say about me?

Holistic Viewpoint:

- **Perceptions:** Why do we see this differently?
- **Contribution:** How did we each contribute to the problem?
- **Impact:** What concerns me? What concerns them?
- **Feelings (Autonomy, Affiliation, Appreciation, Role, Status):** How can I protect my relationship while still being transparent?
- **Identity:** What can we learn from this situation?



A viable outcome must involve dialogue to understand versus surrender or domination of a mindset.

Navigating with skill through a difficult conversation first requires a basic shift in our mindset. From a 'battle of messages' coming from the What Happened or Feelings or Identity Conversations in our head, to a 'learning conversation'. No matter what the subject, our thoughts and feelings fall into the same three categories or conversations. In each of these conversations we make predictable errors that distort our thoughts and feelings and get us in trouble.

The "What Happened" Conversation

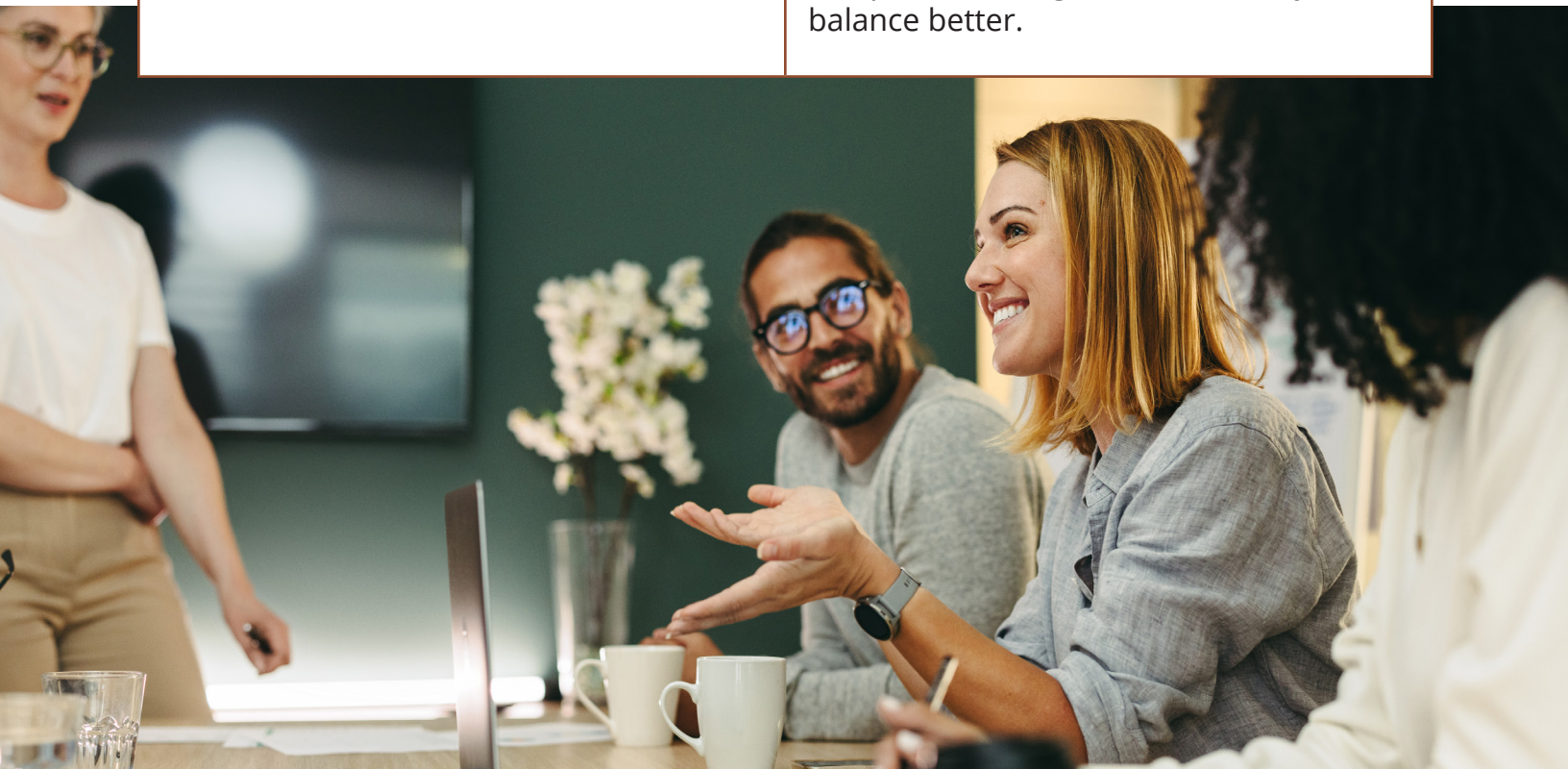
A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
Truth Assumption: I know all I need to know to understand what happened. Goal: Persuade them I'm right.	Truth Assumption: Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely important things that each of us doesn't know. Goal: Explore each other's stories to better understand the situation and why it happened from both perspectives.
Intentions Assumption: I know what they intended. Goal: Let them know what they did was wrong.	Intentions Assumption: I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don't and I can't know what's in their head. Goal: Share the impact on me and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I'm having on them.
Blame Assumption: It's all their fault. (Or it's all my fault.) Goal: Get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends. (Or take all the responsibility and move on quickly.)	Blame Assumption: We have probably both contributed to this mess. Goal: Understand how our actions interact to produce this result.

The Feelings Conversation

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
Assumptions: Feelings are irrelevant or wouldn't be helpful to share. Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them. Goal: Avoid talking about feelings. Or, let 'em have it!	Assumption: Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig in a bit to understand my feelings. Goal: Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judging, blaming or attributing negative intention. Acknowledge feelings before problem-solving.

The Identity Conversation

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
Assumption: I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between. Goal: Preserve all-or-nothing self-image.	Assumption: There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect. Goal: Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.



3

HOW WILL YOU SHOW-UP FOR THE CONVERSATION?

Take some time to reflect before the conversation on how you will show-up. How do you treat people when you enter a conversation only thinking about the facts, feelings and identity from your own point-of-view? What would your behavior be if you were able to shift to the assumptions and goals of a Learning Conversation?

Ask yourself: How am I in the conversation? Am I present, actively listening, and engaging constructively? These elements are key to effective communication.



Best Practices for Engaging:

- Be mentally and physically present.
- Use active listening.
- Acknowledge and paraphrase the message: "I want to make sure I understand your view on..."
- Acknowledge the other's feelings: "I can see this has been frustrating for you."
- Check your perceptions and interpretations by remaining curious and asking open-ended questions.
- Acknowledge your limitations and actions: "I recognize that I..."
- Use open body language; avoid crossing arms and legs, and maintain eye contact.
- If you feel a fight-or-flight response, check your mindset; take a pause and breathe deeply.
- Don't react; remember, between trigger and reaction, there is a space. Use that space to pause, diagnose, and then respond.



How to Plan & Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

Before diving into a difficult conversation, take time to reflect:

- How do you see the situation?
- What assumptions are you making?
- What stories are you telling yourself?
- How might the other person perceive the situation?
- What emotions are being stirred up for you because of this problem?
- What is the impact of this situation on you, and what do you hypothesize about the other person's intentions?

Six Tools for Effective Engagement:

1. **Make it Safe to Talk:** Establish mutual respect and purpose.
2. **Listen (and Breathe):** Seek to understand first, then be understood.
3. **Acknowledge the Other Person's Feelings:** Show empathy and understanding.
4. **Adopt a "Yes, And..." Stance:** Recognize that both perspectives matter.
5. **Separate Impact and Intent:** Avoid assumptions; ask clarifying questions.
6. **Use "I" Messages:** Take responsibility for your own feelings and experiences.

Focus on Contribution, Not Blame:

Shifting from blame to contribution allows both parties to learn and grow, ultimately leading to more productive and healthier outcomes.

Preparing to Engage in a Difficult Conversation

Step	What will you say? What will you do?
1 Spend some private time to identify the problem and acknowledge different points of view.	
2 Be certain this is a problem that is worth addressing.	
3 Invite the other person to talk with you.	
4 Start the conversation by "seeking first to understand."	
5 Share your own point of view, your intentions, and your feelings. Use "I" statements. Take responsibility for your part.	
6 Talk about the future and what can happen differently so you don't end up in the same place.	
7 Thank the other person for talking with you.	

Practicing Difficult Conversations

Finally, practice is essential. Start with a trusted friend and rehearse the conversation using the techniques you've learned. Begin with smaller, everyday discussions before tackling more significant issues. With time, you'll gain the confidence and skills needed to navigate difficult conversations effectively.

Learn more about how Loretta Stagnitto Leadership Associates can help you master difficult conversations.

➤ Book a free 20-minute discovery call at lorettastagnitto.com.

Resources and References for Difficult Conversations

Office of Human Resources, The Ohio State University. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most: A Summary for the Book by Stone, Patton and Heen*

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Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin. ISBN: 0 14 02.8852X

Workshop by Lori Lennox Presented to STRIDE (2021) *Difficult Conversations How to Discuss What Matters Most*.

About Loretta Stagnitto Leadership Associates



LORETTA STAGNITTO™
LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES

Loretta Stagnitto Leadership Associates, LLP (LSLA) specializes in Executive, leadership, and high-performance team development, as well as workplace mental health and wellness coaching.

Founded in 2004 as a high-touch, Executive Coaching and Leadership Development firm, we have had the privilege of serving business professionals at all leadership levels who want to actively engage in their own professional development, as well as grow their staff and teams. LSLA provides both traditional and on-line leadership coaching programs based on our trademarked *"I Know" System™ for Professional and Team Development* and the *Assess. Act. Achieve.* coaching methodology.

Challenges and opportunities faced by Loretta's clients include transitioning from one level of leadership scope to another; leading in dynamic, highly matrix, and culturally ingrained structures; influencing without authority; prioritizing workloads and customer/employee satisfaction in under-resourced environments; dealing with difficult people; building high-performing teams; and inspiring and leading transformational change.

LSLA also provides webinars, workshops and online coaching/training that helps leaders and organizations identify and address workplace anxiety and burnout, a major factor contributing to the worldwide anxiety epidemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2023.

Visit LorettaStagnitto.com for more leadership development and mental health program information.

Where to Find Us



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