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**IN'R CITY TASK FORCE**

**NASHUA, NH**

**FALL 2001 – SPRING 2003**

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**PROJECTS IN CED**

**FINAL PROJECT PAPER**

## **Abstract**

This project attempted to reposition an existent community-based organization, the In'R City Task Force of Nashua NH, working on the inner city neighborhoods' quality of life problems, in order to increase its effectiveness.

Its two-pronged approach included an outreach component and developing relationships with various stakeholders of Nashua, NH's government-driven, downtown district renewal policies.

Although the theory of social change under which this project was initiated has been substantiated to some extent, the author feels the outcomes fell short of what was anticipated.

The participants of this project have ascertained that certain objectives should have progressed in a sequential fashion, contrary to the simultaneous nature described herein. Consequently, although some gains have been made with respect to the task force's desire to influence policy development, the outreach activities described herein fell short of what was planned.

It can be said that this project has now only completed Round One.

## **Summary**

### **Target Community**

The target community for this project is made up of the residents of Nashua, NH's downtown district, delineated by US Census Tracts 105 through 108 in Hillsborough County, NH.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the effort put forth by Nashua's In'R City Task Force since its establishment in 1998, resident members feel it has had little discernible effect on the downtown district communities' most pressing problems. This has caused some of its members to express frustration over what they perceive as the group's ineffectiveness. Without remedy the group risks the continued worsening of its members' morale and possible dissolution, while the concomitant neighborhood conditions remain poor or further degenerate.

### **Goal Statement**

The goal of this project is to reposition the In'R City Task Force in order to be more effective with respect to its mission statement.

### **Target Community's (Current Conditions)**

The most significant aspect of the community with respect to this project is that there was no citizen-driven entity serving as a liaison between local government and community residents.

### Target Community (Desired)

The In'R City Task Force will serve as a vehicle through which the residents of the community will be able to satisfy whatever individual self-interests they share in common; thus serving the community's needs as defined by its people.

### Project Product

The people of this community were to have gained, in the task force, an effective tool to develop the community's human, financial, physical and social capital.

### Outputs

Major outputs were to include:

- A substantial increase in public awareness of the task force and its efforts by residents.
- An increase in the task force's membership reflecting the community's diversity.
- Strategic partnerships with various entities (human service agencies, local businesses, etc.).
- Establish the task force as a liaison between local government and the people of the community (increase accountability).

This project has accomplished a qualified success in serving as a liaison between local government and the community residents. The other outputs have been partially achieved.

Further, the project has evolved into a form more suitable to its goal.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

This project's goals and product have remained the same, but the approach has changed. It will now focus on the task force members as the target community. As such more effort will be spent building relationships among its members and with those identified (especially within the downtown area) as promising potential members of the task force. Further, future activities will be chosen according to two criteria: whether they will bring us closer to our specified outcome, and whether they will increase the organizational capacity of the task force.

Although certain activities have met with some success, e.g., securing positions on community development committees, the gains have been somewhat limited as our membership drive was largely unsuccessful. Apparently we attempted too much at once. Consequently, participation on those committees has not been sufficiently buttressed by a true community mandate.

I would recommend that anyone attempting a similar project proceed as follows:

1. Ensure the necessary relationships have been developed.

The organizers must first establish ties with the community, or at least its leaders, and allow them to express their self interests. Once passion has developed, coordinated action becomes possible. This implies learning about how people become motivated as well as relationship-building skills.

2. The target community must determine its outcome.

Only when one knows one's destination can one devise a means to get there and monitor one's progress.

3. Establish a process.

Ensure that activities (tactics) employed to reach one's goals fit the overarching strategy, which should be developed with the active participation and buy-in of the entire organization. Each tactic must not only bring the group closer to its objectives, but also serve a function in building a stronger organization. (Gonzales, class notes, 2002)

## **Problem Statement**

Despite the effort put forth by Nashua's In'R City Task Force since its establishment in 1998, it has had little discernible effect on the downtown district communities' most pressing problems. This has caused some of its members to express frustration over what they perceive as the group's ineffectiveness. Without remedy the group risks the continued worsening of its members' morale and possible dissolution, while the concomitant neighborhood conditions remain poor or further degenerate.

Recent to the onset of this project, Nashua's mayor and community development offices announced an initiative to develop a new downtown master plan. This raised the additional concern of gentrification among the group's members. Given the vulnerability of the typical downtown household (with respect to the low rate of homeownership, low median household income, educational achievement, and skill set), the concern is that low- to moderate income households will get priced out of their homes.

## **The Target Community**

The target community identified at this project's onset was made up of the In'R City Task Force's constituency: the residents of Nashua's downtown district as delineated by US Census Tracts 105 through 108 in NH's Hillsborough County. The area was home to 19,200 people in the year 2000, estimated as over 20,000 currently.

## **Major Assumptions**

We anticipated that two to five percent of the community would be willing and able to assist our efforts to organize the community. Further we had faith that we would find a way to retain at least half through building momentum.

Our basic premise behind community organizing can be found, among other places, in the works of Saul Alinsky, as follows:

Scratch the surface of any Western society and you will find out there are Haves and Have-nots. Haves are typically a numeric minority of persons who control the majority of the nation's resources. The Have-nots have less control over its nation's wealth per person but more people.

America became famous because of the appearance and growth of a middle class: the Have-a-little-want-mores. It is this group with the greatest potential for wielding power in this country. Without the support of the middle class no leader would have a mandate to rule. Nor is it likely that many economic entities would be permitted to endure.

Therefore the aim of any activism on behalf of the Have-nots should be to rouse the righteous anger of the middle class. This requires sufficient noise to generate attention and core message that attacks the sensibilities of the average person.

The Have-nots are typically the least represented at election time. Alinsky quotes Alexis de Tocqueville in saying that as people become enslaved in the details of their lives it becomes increasingly less relevant (and more bothersome) to vote in elections. Michael Edwards pointed out in that the first



one to drop out of the system are those least served by it (the underserved). As one might expect, the lowest levels of voter registration and turnout can be found among the poorest wards in any city.

(For Nashua these make up its downtown district wherein ward four, the largest in the district, currently has 2,832 registered voters, roughly 30% of its population. Nashua wards outside of the district fare significantly better with typical rates of 45-55%.)

The power of the community organizer lies in the fact that America's system of government, at least on paper, is not supposed to be a plutocracy. This country leadership has always promulgated the promise of democracy to its people. It is this contradiction - the promise of democracy versus the reality of plutocracy - that gives an organizing initiative its power to effect change. If the organization produces a sufficient number of people such that its demands at least seem to come from the community at large, to deny them is to expose the hypocrisy inherent in each political campaign. This could amount to political suicide and threatens the power base of the Haves.

### **Goal Statement**

The goal of this project is to reposition the In'R City Task Force in order to be more effective with respect to its mission statement.

### **Target Community (Current)**

The most significant aspect of the community with respect to this project is that there was no citizen-driven entity serving as liaison between local government and community residents.

Without this valuable role there were fewer opportunities for the concerns of the people to be heard and for their government to be held accountable to its constituents. (Edwards, 2001)

US Census 2000 figures:

- The educational achievement levels for residents in this area tend to be disproportionately lower than the city's: 28% of all adults (25+ yrs.) in this community do not have a high school diploma, versus 13% for all of Nashua. Of those in the target community 21% have a college degree, compared to the city's 41%.
- Half of this community's residents work in either a production occupation (26%) or holds a job as a sales associate (25%), likely as a retail sales clerk. Nashua overall shows a predominance of those working in management or holding a professional position (40%).
- The median household income for each of the four census tracts is less than 66%, of the Nashua's typical family, slightly over \$50,000 in that year. This range has proven consistent over the years.

[NOTE: According to HUD the median household income for Nashua PMSA, last updated January 31, 2002, is \$71,100. No data is yet available for the target area but, given its history, the gap is not expected to have shrunk.]

- The downtown area resident is more likely to be poor than his/her outside counterpart. The poverty rate for downtown households is 16%. By comparison areas outside of this district have only 4%.
- Considerably more of the housing stock is rented to its occupants. Only 23% of downtown housing in the district is owner-occupied, barely more than two-fifths of the city's 57%.

## **Target Community (Desired)**

The In'R City Task Force will serve as a vehicle through which the residents of the community will be able to satisfy whatever individual self-interests they share in common; thus serving the community's needs as defined by its people.

We believe that through collective action the task force will develop into a strong organization with a clear sense of direction and quantifiable progress toward building human, organizational and social skills. Not only will these activities lessen some of the aforementioned problems, they will thus serve as a morale booster for task force members.

## **Project Product**

The people of this community were to have gained, in the task force, an effective tool to develop the community's human, financial, physical and social capital.

## **Outputs**

Major outputs were to include:

- A substantial increase in public awareness of the task force and its efforts by residents.
- An increase in the task force's membership reflecting the community's diversity.
- Strategic partnerships with various entities (human service agencies, local businesses, etc.).
- Establish the task force as a liaison between local government and the people of the community (increase accountability).

## **Background Information**

Since 1991 a large number of businesses (especially from service industries) have moved to, or started up in Nashua. They have brought a variety of jobs and people to the city and dramatically increased the property tax base. Unfortunately most of the benefits of this growth have gone to the wealthiest individuals or those with a set of high-level job skills (e.g., business services, finance, insurance, and real estate). The city's population has spiked upward over the last decade, and so has the cost of living, most notably property taxes and rents.

Similarly the welfare rolls have been on the rise in Nashua. As manufacturing jobs decline in proportion to jobs that either require a high skills set, or do not pay a living wage (e.g., retail sales clerk), Nashua's most vulnerable citizens have suffered rising gentrification pressures with little human, physical or economic reinvestment from the city's increased revenue stream. Consequently these assets have deteriorated over time, taking social capital along with them. This is most easily recognized in the complaints some residents have voiced about a general lack of courtesy or respect for others (noise, violent crime, etc.).

[We believe that social capital "investments" will be made concurrent with a more active citizenry working together on common problems.]

## **History**

In 1998 Southern New Hampshire Regional Medical Center sponsored an effort called Partnerships for Healthier Communities. The purpose of this task force was to determine the health care needs of the target community. Among other things they learned of the need for primary health care, dental care, the need to discourage youth from smoking. Appropriate programs were promulgated as a result of their findings.

One such program was the Neighborhood Task Force (later the In'r-city Task Force). The effort was an attempt to involve citizens in the process of self-help through organization.

The Task Force, made up of representatives from human service agencies, local government and a few of the area's residents had a promising start. They completed a door-to-door survey that revealed certain needs in the community, like crime and noise control, and managed to generate a certain level of interest from the residents. This was revealed by the turnout at the ensuing meeting held to discuss the survey's results wherein an estimated 60 people attended.

Over a three year period (ending Sept. '01) attendance at the monthly meetings had decreased by task force members. Some have moved on to a different set of challenges and/or relocated. Others have attempted to make room for an increased role of citizen leadership. Still others have become disenchanted with what they perceive as the group's lack of effectiveness. The mission statement has evolved from a health needs focus into working, "... to create better inner-city neighborhoods through awareness, organizing and involvement." As of fall 2001 most members had felt the group "lacked direction, connections and other resources [required] to make a difference" in local residents' living standard. Consequently they felt they had accomplished little outside of having published a newsletter (albeit a widely distributed one), and were unsure of what step to take next.

As of my joining the group, as a resident and a service learning volunteer, this neighborhood-based organization was still a semi-formal coalition of volunteers, predominantly composed of professionals who did not live in the target area. The residents who still attend the monthly meetings described frustration expressed by their neighbors over "hundreds" of meetings, replete with presentations and promises made by various professionals (e.g., police

chiefs, aldermen & aldermen-at-large, and code enforcement officers) that produce no perceived results. They still complained about the same issues (e.g., crime, noise, and housing code violations) that have beset this community for years.

Employees of Nashua's Community Development Division (the division's director, the newly hired economic development director, and the downtown development specialist) have announced plans to begin a downtown master planning process. For the last ten years Nashua has also been working on reviving its downtown, wherein the economic mainstay (retail shopping), had fallen by the wayside with the introduction of heightened competition in the southern part of the city. A most recent attempt has been through "The Great American Downtown"™ program, designed to pick up where a government-initiated Main Street Community bid proved unsuccessful. [The Main Street Community Program bid germinated in response to the waning of a volunteer effort (Destination Downtown) to maintain the vitality of Nashua's Main Street; and was largely orchestrated by chief administrative officials in city hall. That coalition was predominantly made up of business and large property owners.] Residents of this area, task force members expressed concerns over economic development plans designed without the input of local residents having been incorporated into the process.

The task force, and this project, attempted a two-pronged approach:

1. We began an outreach campaign to increase the group's membership.
2. We attended public meetings dealing with matters affecting the inner city neighborhoods and voiced the need for downtown residents to serve on the various planning committees for each initiative.

## **Results: Outreach**

We decided to redeploy the survey used three years prior by the task force. The survey had been used to determine what residents liked and didn't like about their neighborhoods. A meeting had been held to discuss their results; 60 people attended. Our group decided to try to repeat the effort, and then attempt to keep the momentum going. Unlike the prior effort our use of the survey instrument was as a method of recruitment. We would catch people's attention; excite them; and use that passion to induce change. As we saw it our biggest challenge would be to find methods to sustain, and increase, our momentum.

We developed the survey through the summer of 2002 and began to deploy it mid-fall. We had decided we would eventually survey ten percent of the downtown area's 7800 households. This would be accomplished over the next eighteen months by concentrating our efforts on one neighborhood at a time (1,500 to 3,000 people). Once a given area had been covered we would host a meeting there to discuss the results with those residents and encourage them to work with the task force to improve their community.

After spending so much time discussing and developing the survey, we were impatient to begin. Winter was approaching and we were concerned about having to wait until the next spring. After one more meeting all agreed to begin and correct whatever problems encountered along the way:

- We had no three people to start with, each working at our own pace.
- None of the three spoke Spanish, in a target community that included a seventeen percent Hispanic population. Further ten percent of the population is isolated by a language barrier. [A few days into the project I appealed to a Hispanic volunteer group to assist us.

Six or seven youths agreed but I could not get back in touch with my fellow group members.]

- No clear plan existed by that time to secure a place to hold our first public meeting.

Ten days later we had completed six surveys.

After the first snowfall of the season, during the next week, I called my fellow participants who agreed to postpone this activity for the time being.

### **Results: Representation**

Throughout the spring and summer months we held meetings with various public officials regarding the need for direct citizen participation in policy development. We began to show up at various public meetings and ask for a seat at the table. Once an article appeared in the local newspaper describing our efforts, we began to receive invitations.

Since the end of the winter term ('02) the task force has secured a seat on both the "Great American Downtown Committee and Downtown Master Planning processes. Most recently we have been invited to participate in NH's Livable, Walk-able Communities Program, another government-initiated effort seemingly designed to realize the vision of the Community Development Office's Director.

During this period some of our other efforts began to do considerably well. Our request to become part of the Great American Downtown Project (and offshoot of Nashua's failed attempt to become a Main Street Community) was granted. Another of our members was also appointed to the city's downtown master plan task force. Another became a charter member of



another initiative to help Nashua's underserved population with respect to Nashua's relatively high dropout rate. Each of these actions increased the task force's recognition.

Unfortunately since we hadn't yet received a clear mandate from the downtown community. Each resident ended up representing his or her own viewpoint. Although the problems voiced were along the lines of what we had been hearing from people (informally), we hadn't yet been able to determine exactly what we wanted to do about them.

We had made some progress in that we were seen as somewhat influential in the community, likely due to the aforementioned efforts made during the previous three year period. According to Nashua's Economic Development Director the supply of city-owned affordable units was preserved (as a concession) in the final draft copy of the new downtown master plan due to the task force's efforts.

## **Conclusions**

In the five to six weeks that followed the cessation of the survey effort (through the holiday season) discussion with fellow members and classmates, supplemented by a different focus in my literature review, helped me to see some of our problem areas. The task force was simply not ready to take on a task of such a large magnitude, relative to our capacity at that time.

I was a resident of the community, and also a student a CED program. I felt this gave me go-ahead to bring all I learned in the classroom and dump it all over the task force meetings. Neither the group nor I understood we should have been gradually adding to the skill set of the resident members instead of listening to me talk outside of their experience. I became an expert instead of an organizer, a sort of "indigenous, professional nonresident". Armed with my "knowledge" and enthusiasm the group never stood a chance.

By the end of the summer I had become, by default, the group's spokesperson. I called the meetings, did most of the talking in them, suggested the action items and completed most of those. I met with various public and private, nonprofit sector officials regarding the efforts of the task force. I went to the public meetings and spoke on behalf of the group's concerns. [Other members of the group contributed to each of these activities as well, but, in my new role, I should have done more to encourage their skills development. I was so intent on carrying out my tasks well that I neglected to consider why "those" tasks, and, more importantly who should be performing them.]

Finally, once I understood the importance of building relationships I forced myself to realize that I knew almost no one in my own community. My research question changed from, "Which actions we should take to reach our results?," to, "What can I do that will help people motivate themselves take action on their own self interests collectively?"

In retrospect we have made some respectable gains considering our resources and the barrage of government led initiatives running simultaneously as well their implicit time constraints.

I began to acquire books on marketing (to learn how to sell ideas). This led to psychology (especially emotional development and relationship-building) and communication. I have recently begun to apply these techniques and am now developing a personal campaign to rebuild those relationships within the group. If we are to build a movement strong enough to make larger demands we must make the time to perform some type of outreach activities. We must also have faith that as long as we work on this and monitor these initiatives we will be able to exert influence on the process when necessary.

Had I a better understanding of organizing as a process from the beginning, I would have considered the task force members the target community of this project. My initial literature review exposed me to a considerable amount of information on citizen-led initiatives.

Unfortunately most of it described what the conditions were like before the initiative formed and then launched into how much these groups accomplished with some discussion of what they did to get there.

In retrospect it is possible to see that activities conducted by the task force prior to this project (meetings, a newsletter, survey deployment) were tactics employed without an overarching strategy. Consequently it was not possible to measure what those activities accomplished in terms of the problems faced by the group's constituents. This project brought the group closer to its desired outcome in that our discussions produced an idea of what we wanted and how we should get there.

I needed a more thorough understanding about the overall process of organizing from a higher level of abstraction. Only once I understood the relationship between goals, strategy and tactics was I better equipped to place these concepts into perspective for the group. Apparently what I needed was beyond the scope of the material I had been reading, so I had assumed that what I needed didn't exist. We surmised that if we kept open minds and focused on maintaining our commitment that we would simply work our way through the process, but eventually develop feel for it.

I learned my primary (target) community should have been the task force members themselves. Since they were the ones who expressed their problems, and thus creating this project, it should have been deduced that it was their vantage point that was of immediate concern. As this project continues I will try to develop a tool that will measure what they feel, to

what degree and why. Periodic measurement of these emotions/thoughts as a monitoring indicator should provide very useful information to long-term success.

The group is composed of two types of members: residents of the downtown community and human service professionals who live elsewhere.

The nonresidents, collectively, possess a high skill set that could be used to create a strong organization. On the other hand there are two factors that preclude their ability to lead such an effort:

First, all of these persons are either directly or indirectly on the city government payroll. As the group grows in size and influence, it will be important to not have any leaders beholden to potential targets of its campaigns.

Second, these members all live outside of the community. To lead such a movement would have recreated the problems associated with of top-down problem-solving. To their credit, this subgroup opted to withdraw from prominence, choosing instead to practice a mild form of benign negligence and receded from meeting attendance in order to allow this to occur.

The second subgroup was made up local residents. These folks displayed a number of talents and connections within the community with the indigenous leaders, but an apparent lack of experience with respect to establishing goals, strategies and tactics.

Hence the project becomes one of building an organization through building a string of successes that develop the indigenous leadership.

## **Recommendations**

I have learned there is a great deal of knowledge that ought to be disseminated to make the process go more smoothly beyond how organize or even how to develop an entity that has the task of facilitating activism. One must know where to look as much of it is found outside the field.

I believe that some of the best materials to help in this regard will not be found in books on organizing, per se. Some of the most helpful publications I found are in the subjects of psychology and self-help, business management, teaching and mythology because their topics deal with getting people to take part in a specific activity. We must understand more about the human psyche in order to encourage action.

Once my attention became focused on the members I began to get useful feedback on why our accomplishments were so lacking: We were still largely disorganized in that we hadn't yet established where we were as a group or even an approach. Again, more work was needed to firm up relationships among the members and, "make sure we were all on the same page," before beginning any activities with outside parties. Once we had gotten opportunities to provide input at various settings, we found we lacked a clear message. We had created no short term goals, no issues; therefore whichever member was there ended up speaking/her mind instead of representing the community. Had local officials balked at our demands to participate we been forced to show evidence of our mandate. As we hadn't yet completed much of our outreach efforts we might have had to eat a few words.

Discussions about the above results indicate that our reach exceeded our grasp somewhat by trying to accomplish too many tasks at the same time, and some too soon. Clearly,

undertaking such a large project without having first developed the human, social and organizational capacities of the task force could not have ended otherwise.

In review a certain impediments seem to have had the greatest hampering effect:

The responsibilities (action items) that came out of each meeting were suggested and completed disproportionately. We should have devoted more time to planning what would come after surveying each neighborhood. How would we have gotten a decent turnout at each meeting? What was to be the outcome? How would we have built up momentum, and added capacity to our efforts? In short, although we had some idea of how to proceed, we risked trying to plan too much on the fly and getting overwhelmed. This could have triggered a costly, and very public, setback.

Next, we never clearly addressed what would happen if the survey had successfully divined the opinions of the larger community and/or attracted new members. We had some idea to host a public forum from which we would try to organize the masses, but without having ironed out the details it could have become disastrous. Ours was a purely volunteer organization of individuals gave their time to further our efforts. By the time we began the survey there were only three of us to begin the effort on the street level. We addressed how much each was willing to donate to “the cause” (in time, energy or financial resources) in only the most limited fashion. Had we accomplished our objectives we probably would have realized we did not have the resources required for such a large undertaking.

We have been somewhat successful in getting our concerns considered in community and economic policy development. Unfortunately, because we were unable to go beyond anecdotal evidence of what the community resident concerns were, those members who participated in the relevant committees could only speak on behalf of what they had heard and experienced, not

what the statistics would have shown. The bottom line is that we might have only succeeded in representing our own concerns for our neighborhoods, versus what the community at large might have decided it wanted.

We had passion, but not enough resources (especially people power). We probably should have started by discussing our individual self-interests. We could then have begun a type of relationship-building process, involving more people or organizations until we were ready to take a larger step.

Outreach should be followed by a visioning process. The outcome of this becomes the result the group would strive for. Then, once the destination had become clear, the group would have been better positioned to design a process, complete with overall strategy and tactics, to reach that end.

Perhaps most importantly the project, such as it was, proposed to reposition the task force in order to be more effective with respect to its mission. While this goal seems straightforward at first blush, it is not necessarily the best fit for the problem statement. It is a relatively simple leap from one to the other, but it was a mistake to presume that the former would necessarily resolve the latter.

This project's goal and, to a lesser extent, product have evolved considerably since this project's inception, particularly over the last five months.

Today the goal addresses the above problem statement more directly: To revitalize the members of the In'R City Task Force by establishing a clear instrumentality whereby the task force members can both improve the quality of life for downtown district residents, and, to some extent, measure those improvements relative to their action.

The product for this project, then, becomes one tailored to fit its goal: The task force will evolve into a growing, vibrant organization with a clearly defined vision and a process by which to accomplish it. This model will have four clearly defined and internally consistent components:

1. a depiction of the organization's function,
2. an established geographic basis,
3. a basis for membership, and
4. a funding base.

(Bobo et al, Organizing for Social Change, p.64)

The next person to undertake such a project should begin by taking nothing for granted. An organizer cannot be effective without solid relationships in the community from which to build a base. Second, the organizer must identify the self-interests of those persons involved, as expressed by them. With a clear idea of what these persons want, the organizer will be better positioned to show them how to achieve these desires through collective action.

This requires a fair understanding of the essential elements of motivation, building relationships and the process of organizational development. The organizer should begin with a self-assessment to determine his or her skills in this area and conduct a literature review if unable to clearly state a few principles upon which such a campaign is based.

The organizer should be prepared to provide an overview of the process and principles of community organizing. This will help to keep the group grounded and avoid losing focus on the organization's goals, its strategy to achieve those goals, and the role tactics (activities) must play in enacting the group's strategy.



Finally it is crucial to keep in mind that the efforts of the group must add to the development of a strong organization by winning real, concrete improvements in people's lives, giving people a sense of their own power, and altering the relations of power. (Bobo et al, pp. 11-12)

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