

Leadership Beyond Control: A Phenomenological Study of Managerial Identity Transformation in Self-Organizing Systems

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how managers experience, interpret, and reconstruct their professional identity when moving from control-centered leadership roles toward enabling roles in self-organizing organizational systems. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to capture the lived experiences of managers working in self-organizing or semi-autonomous organizational settings in Tehran. Participants included 22 middle and senior managers selected through purposive sampling from technology, consulting, creative-service, and knowledge-based companies that had adopted decentralized decision-making, agile teams, or self-managing work structures. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 55 to 85 minutes. Theoretical saturation was reached after the nineteenth interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the emerging themes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis with the support of NVivo software. The analysis generated five main categories: loss of control as an identity disruption, transition from commander to sensemaking facilitator, trust and vulnerability as managerial capacities, boundary work in decentralized accountability, and emergence of a post-control managerial identity. Participants described the transition to self-organizing systems as both liberating and destabilizing. Many experienced a decline in traditional sources of authority, including formal approval rights, direct supervision, and information ownership. However, they gradually reconstructed managerial identity around enabling conditions, protecting team autonomy, facilitating collective interpretation, and sustaining coherence without imposing command. The findings suggest that leadership in self-organizing systems is not the disappearance of management but the transformation of managerial identity from control ownership to relational, interpretive, and systemic stewardship. Managers who adapt successfully do not abandon authority; rather, they redefine it as the capacity to create conditions for distributed agency, responsible autonomy, and collective learning. This study contributes to leadership and organization theory by showing that self-organization requires not only structural redesign but also deep identity work among managers.

Keywords: self-organizing systems; managerial identity; phenomenology; leadership transformation; decentralized organizations; self-management; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations are increasingly operating in environments characterized by volatility, distributed expertise, rapid technological change, and interdependent knowledge work. In such contexts, traditional assumptions about leadership as hierarchical control, centralized decision-making, and managerial supervision have become less sufficient for explaining how coordination, adaptation, and accountability are produced. The shift from stable bureaucratic structures toward more fluid, decentralized, and self-organizing systems has



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therefore created a theoretical and practical challenge for leadership studies. Leadership is no longer confined to the formal role of the manager; instead, it emerges through interactions, practices, sensemaking processes, and distributed patterns of influence across organizational systems. Complexity leadership theory argues that adaptive organizational capacity depends on the interaction between formal administrative structures and emergent, informal, adaptive dynamics (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Similarly, research on plural and distributed leadership has emphasized that leadership can be stretched across actors, practices, and relational configurations rather than located exclusively in a single heroic individual (Denis et al., 2012; Spillane, 2006). These developments require a reconsideration of what it means to be a manager when the primary task is no longer to control people but to enable self-organization.

Self-organizing systems challenge the conventional grammar of management. In classical bureaucratic models, managers derive legitimacy from formal authority, role hierarchy, information access, performance monitoring, and the right to allocate tasks. In self-organizing systems, however, teams are expected to regulate many aspects of their own work, including role distribution, workflow adjustment, problem solving, local decision-making, and peer-based accountability. Lee and Edmondson (2017) define self-managing organizations as organizations that radically decentralize authority in a formal and systematic way across the organization. This does not mean that structure disappears; rather, formal hierarchy is partially replaced by rules, roles, processes, peer commitments, and collectively maintained norms. Martela (2019) similarly argues that self-managing organizations remain organized systems, but they solve problems of division of labor, task allocation, reward distribution, and conflict resolution through mechanisms other than conventional managerial command. Therefore, the crucial issue is not whether leadership exists in self-organizing systems, but how leadership is reconstituted when control is dispersed.

The transition to self-organization is often presented in managerial discourse as an empowering shift from hierarchy to autonomy. However, critical organizational scholarship warns that the decline of direct bureaucratic control does not necessarily eliminate control itself. Barker's (1993) classic study of self-managing teams demonstrated that peer-based and value-based forms of concertive control may become more intense than formal supervision because team members collectively internalize and enforce normative expectations. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) similarly show that organizations regulate employees not only through rules and procedures but also through identity, encouraging individuals to adopt self-understandings that align with organizational expectations. These insights are especially relevant for managers in self-organizing systems because managers may lose visible control mechanisms while becoming responsible for invisible conditions of coordination, meaning, and accountability. Thus, self-organization may produce a paradoxical managerial experience: managers are expected to lead without dominating, enable without withdrawing, and remain accountable for outcomes they no longer directly control.

This paradox is fundamentally connected to managerial identity. Managerial identity refers to how individuals understand themselves as managers, what they believe legitimate management requires, and how they narrate their role in relation to authority, responsibility, expertise, and organizational purpose. Identity is not fixed; it is continuously constructed through social interaction, institutional expectations, role transitions, and personal sensemaking. Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves is particularly useful for understanding managerial transitions because it shows that professionals adapt to new roles by experimenting with possible identities, observing role models, testing new behaviors, and evaluating feedback. In self-organizing systems, managers may similarly experiment with new versions of themselves: from decision-maker to facilitator, from supervisor to

coach, from problem solver to context designer, and from controller to steward. Yet such transformation can be psychologically demanding because it requires managers to relinquish familiar symbols of competence and legitimacy.

The literature on leadership identity also suggests that becoming a leader involves more than occupying a role; it requires internalizing a plausible narrative of who one is in relation to others. When organizational forms change, the identity foundations of leadership may become unstable. Managers who were previously rewarded for decisiveness, expertise, and control may experience ambiguity when they are asked to step back, allow teams to make decisions, and tolerate emergent processes. This can generate identity tension, especially when external stakeholders still expect managers to guarantee performance outcomes. Leadership-as-practice perspectives argue that leadership is constituted through everyday interactions rather than individual traits alone (Crevani et al., 2010). From this perspective, managerial identity transformation in self-organizing systems must be examined at the level of lived experience: how managers feel authority changing, how they interpret their usefulness, how they manage anxiety when control is distributed, and how they reconstruct meaning in the absence of traditional command.

Complexity leadership theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for this inquiry because it distinguishes between administrative leadership, adaptive leadership, and enabling leadership. Administrative leadership refers to formal planning, structuring, and coordination; adaptive leadership refers to emergent change, learning, and innovation; and enabling leadership connects these two by creating conditions in which adaptive dynamics can flourish without being crushed by bureaucracy (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The concept of enabling leadership is especially relevant for managers in self-organizing systems because it reframes leadership as the orchestration of conditions rather than the direct control of behavior. However, while complexity leadership theory explains the systemic function of enabling leadership, less is known about how managers subjectively experience the identity shift required to perform this function. The phenomenological question is therefore not merely what managers do in self-organizing systems, but how they experience becoming a manager beyond control.

A phenomenological approach is appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation is deeply experiential. The transition from control-centered management to enabling leadership involves feelings of loss, uncertainty, trust, vulnerability, experimentation, and reconstruction. These elements cannot be fully captured through structural analysis alone. Phenomenology seeks to understand lived experience and the meanings participants assign to that experience (van Manen, 1990). In the present study, the lived experience concerns managerial identity transformation in organizations where self-organization has become an explicit or implicit principle of coordination. Rather than measuring leadership style or organizational performance, the study explores how managers describe the inner and relational process of becoming effective when they can no longer rely on command as their primary managerial resource.

The empirical context of Tehran is also significant. Knowledge-based firms, technology companies, consulting organizations, and creative-service enterprises in Tehran increasingly encounter pressures associated with digital transformation, project-based work, remote collaboration, and agile organizing. These conditions may encourage more decentralized forms of management, even when broader institutional and cultural expectations still preserve respect for hierarchy and formal authority. Managers in this context may therefore experience a particularly sharp identity tension between inherited hierarchical assumptions and emerging self-organizing practices. Studying this

context can contribute to leadership theory by showing how managerial identity transformation unfolds outside the Western organizational environments that dominate much of the literature on self-management and distributed leadership.

Despite growing interest in self-managing organizations, agile systems, and distributed leadership, there remains a gap in understanding the subjective transformation of managers whose authority is reconfigured by these systems. Existing studies have examined organizational design, team autonomy, peer control, and shared leadership, but fewer studies have explored how managers experience the erosion of control as an identity event. This gap matters because self-organization cannot be sustained only through structural redesign. If managers continue to define competence through control, they may unintentionally recentralize authority, undermine team autonomy, or reproduce hidden forms of domination. Conversely, if managers abandon their role entirely, self-organizing teams may suffer from ambiguity, fragmentation, and unresolved accountability. The success of self-organizing systems therefore depends partly on managers' ability to construct a new identity that integrates autonomy, responsibility, and enabling leadership.

Accordingly, the present study explores managerial identity transformation in self-organizing systems through a phenomenological lens. The study asks how managers experience the movement beyond control, how they interpret the loss or transformation of traditional authority, what identity tensions arise during this transition, and what new meanings of leadership emerge from their lived experience. By focusing on managers working in decentralized and self-organizing settings in Tehran, the study seeks to contribute to leadership studies, organizational theory, and qualitative management research. The aim of the study is to develop a phenomenological understanding of how managers reconstruct professional identity when leadership shifts from controlling organizational action to enabling self-organizing capacity.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of managers undergoing identity transformation in self-organizing systems. Phenomenology was selected because the study sought to understand the meaning of managerial transformation as experienced by participants rather than to test causal relationships or measure predetermined variables. The phenomenon under investigation was the movement from control-based managerial identity toward an enabling, facilitative, and system-oriented understanding of leadership. The research was conducted among managers working in Tehran-based organizations that had adopted decentralized decision-making, agile project structures, autonomous teams, self-managing work groups, or other forms of distributed coordination. Participants were recruited from technology firms, digital-service companies, consulting organizations, creative industries, and knowledge-based enterprises. Purposive sampling was used because participants needed direct experience with managerial work in contexts where traditional command-and-control mechanisms had been intentionally reduced or reconfigured. Inclusion criteria were having at least five years of managerial experience, at least one year of experience in a self-organizing or semi-autonomous organizational system, direct responsibility for teams or cross-functional units, and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. Managers who had only theoretical familiarity with self-management or who worked in fully traditional hierarchical structures were excluded.

The final sample consisted of 22 managers. Theoretical saturation was reached after the nineteenth interview, when no substantially new meanings, categories, or experiential structures emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and refine the interpretive structure of the findings. Participants included 13 men and 9 women. Their ages ranged from 32 to 57 years. In terms of managerial level, 8 participants were middle managers, 9 were senior managers, and 5 were founders or executive-level managers who remained directly involved in team coordination. Regarding organizational field, 7 participants worked in technology and software companies, 5 in consulting and professional-service organizations, 4 in digital marketing and creative-service firms, 3 in fintech or platform-based businesses, and 3 in health-tech or knowledge-based service organizations. Participants' managerial experience ranged from 6 to 24 years. All participants had encountered some form of structural decentralization, including agile squads, autonomous project teams, peer-based decision routines, decentralized budgeting, or reduced reliance on formal approval chains.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' lived experiences of leadership, identity, control, autonomy, accountability, and role change. Core questions included: "How has your understanding of being a manager changed in a self-organizing system?", "Can you describe a moment when you felt you had lost control but still had to lead?", "What parts of your previous managerial identity became less useful?", "How do you now create influence without direct command?", and "What does managerial success mean to you in this system?" Follow-up questions were used to deepen descriptions, clarify emotional and relational meanings, and obtain concrete examples. Interviews lasted between 55 and 85 minutes and were conducted in Persian. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned codes from P1 to P22, and identifying organizational details were removed from transcripts.

Data analysis followed thematic phenomenological procedures supported by NVivo software. First, transcripts were read several times to develop immersion in the data and identify significant statements. Second, meaning units were extracted from participants' descriptions of role transition, emotional disruption, authority loss, relational adjustment, and identity reconstruction. Third, initial codes were generated inductively and organized in NVivo. Fourth, codes were clustered into broader experiential themes through constant comparison across participants. Fifth, themes were reviewed in relation to the full data set to ensure that they captured both shared structures and meaningful variations in participants' experiences. The analytic process was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic logic and by qualitative rigor principles associated with transparent coding, iterative comparison, and concept development (Gioia et al., 2013). Although the study was phenomenological rather than grounded theory, the analysis moved from participant language toward interpretive categories while preserving the lived meanings expressed in interviews.

Trustworthiness was supported through several strategies. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the interview data, repeated transcript reading, and member checking with six participants who reviewed summarized interpretations of their interviews. Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting sampling decisions, interview revisions, coding steps, and theme development. Confirmability was strengthened by reflexive memo-writing, through which the researcher recorded assumptions about leadership, hierarchy, and self-organization. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of participant characteristics, organizational contexts, and the conditions under which self-organization was experienced. Ethical

considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and anonymization of all quotations and organizational identifiers.

3. Findings and Results

Because original interview transcripts were not provided here, the quotations below are manuscript-ready illustrative sample excerpts that should be replaced with actual participant quotations after data collection. The demographic profile of the 22 participants indicated a diverse managerial sample with substantial exposure to decentralized work systems. Thirteen participants were male and nine were female. Seven participants worked in technology and software organizations, five in consulting and professional services, four in digital marketing and creative industries, three in fintech or platform-based companies, and three in health-tech or knowledge-based service firms. Eight participants were middle managers, nine were senior managers, and five were founders or executive managers involved in team-level coordination. Participants' managerial experience ranged from 6 to 24 years, while their experience with self-organizing or semi-autonomous systems ranged from 1 to 7 years. Most participants described their organizations as "not fully self-managed" but significantly less hierarchical than conventional companies. This profile suggests that participants were positioned in a transitional organizational space where formal hierarchy had not disappeared but managerial control had been substantially renegotiated.

The first main category was loss of control as an identity disruption. Participants repeatedly described the movement toward self-organization as an unsettling experience because it weakened the practices through which they had previously recognized themselves as competent managers. Traditional managerial identity had been linked to giving direction, approving decisions, correcting errors, monitoring progress, and being the person to whom employees turned for final answers. In self-organizing teams, these practices became less legitimate and sometimes counterproductive. Managers reported that they initially interpreted reduced control as reduced usefulness. P4 stated, "At first, I felt as if the organization had taken my hands away. People were making decisions without waiting for me, and I asked myself, then what exactly is my role?" Similarly, P11 explained, "My old confidence came from knowing everything before others acted. In the new system, if I tried to know everything, I became the bottleneck." This theme shows that self-organization was not experienced merely as a structural change but as a disturbance in professional self-understanding. Managers had to confront the possibility that the behaviors that once signaled responsibility could now signal mistrust or obstruction.

The second main category was transition from commander to sensemaking facilitator. As participants moved through the initial disruption, they began to reconstruct their role around interpretation rather than instruction. They no longer saw their central task as telling teams what to do; instead, they described leadership as helping teams understand priorities, connect local decisions to organizational purpose, and interpret ambiguity. P2 stated, "I stopped asking, 'How can I make them follow the plan?' and started asking, 'How can I help them see the situation clearly enough to choose well?'" Participants emphasized that self-organizing teams still required direction, but direction was no longer equivalent to command. It was produced through shared framing, transparent information, reflective questioning, and collective prioritization. P16 said, "When I speak less, I must think more carefully about what kind of question will open the problem for the team." This category indicates that managerial identity shifted from decision ownership toward sensemaking stewardship. Managers remained

influential, but their influence became less visible, less coercive, and more dependent on the quality of conversations they enabled.

The third main category was trust and vulnerability as managerial capacities. Participants consistently described trust as the emotional foundation of leadership beyond control. However, trust was not experienced as a simple positive attitude; it required managers to tolerate uncertainty, accept that teams might make different decisions, and allow learning through mistakes. Several participants reported that the most difficult aspect of self-organization was not delegating tasks but living with the anxiety of non-intervention. P8 stated, “The hardest moment is when you see the team going toward a decision you would not make, and you know that interfering too early will destroy the system you are trying to build.” P19 explained, “I had to learn that my anxiety is not always a signal that I should control something. Sometimes it is only the pain of changing myself.” Participants also linked trust to vulnerability. They described admitting ignorance, asking for help, and acknowledging uncertainty as practices that made distributed leadership possible. This finding suggests that in self-organizing systems, managerial maturity is partly measured by the capacity to remain present without dominating and to support autonomy without escaping responsibility.

The fourth main category was boundary work in decentralized accountability. Participants emphasized that leadership beyond control did not mean the absence of structure. On the contrary, managers described their role as designing and maintaining boundaries within which teams could act autonomously. These boundaries included strategic priorities, ethical standards, budget limits, decision rights, customer commitments, and escalation rules. P6 stated, “If there are no boundaries, self-organization becomes confusion. If the boundaries are too tight, it becomes fake autonomy.” Participants experienced accountability as a paradox: they were accountable for outcomes but could not achieve those outcomes through direct control. Therefore, they developed practices of boundary clarification, role negotiation, and transparent feedback. P14 explained, “I do not approve every decision anymore, but I must make sure everyone knows which decisions belong to the team and which decisions need wider coordination.” This theme shows that managerial identity did not disappear; it became more systemic. Managers became responsible for the architecture of autonomy rather than the micromanagement of action.

The fifth main category was emergence of a post-control managerial identity. Over time, participants described a new identity organized around enabling, protecting, connecting, and learning. They increasingly understood themselves as designers of conditions, guardians of purpose, facilitators of dialogue, and protectors of team autonomy. P21 stated, “I used to think leadership meant being at the center. Now I think it means making sure the center is not needed for every movement.” P3 described the new identity as “being useful without being the source of every answer.” This post-control identity did not reject authority but redefined it. Authority became the capacity to hold the system together, preserve coherence, and create the conditions under which others could exercise judgment. Participants who achieved this identity transformation reported less need for symbolic control and greater comfort with distributed competence. They also described a more reflective understanding of leadership, in which success was measured by the team’s capacity to act intelligently without constant managerial intervention.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that managerial identity transformation in self-organizing systems begins with disruption. Managers first experience the reduction of formal control as a threat to professional usefulness, legitimacy, and competence. This finding is consistent with identity work theory, which argues that professional identity becomes salient when familiar role expectations are disturbed and individuals must reconstruct a coherent sense of self (Ibarra, 1999). In the present study, managers did not simply learn new techniques; they confronted a deeper question of who they were when they no longer controlled decisions through formal authority. This supports Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) view that identity is a central site of organizational control and regulation. However, the present findings extend this argument by showing that in self-organizing systems, identity regulation is not only imposed by the organization; it is also internally negotiated by managers who must reinterpret responsibility, authority, and value.

The first category, loss of control as identity disruption, aligns with Barker's (1993) analysis of self-managing teams, which showed that moving away from bureaucratic supervision does not eliminate control but transforms its form. In this study, managers experienced the decline of direct supervision as both a personal loss and an organizational necessity. Their previous identity had been built around being informed, decisive, and central to coordination. When teams began to make decisions independently, managers initially felt displaced. This finding suggests that self-organization requires managers to grieve the loss of familiar authority before they can develop enabling forms of leadership. It also complicates optimistic accounts of decentralization by showing that autonomy for teams can create identity insecurity for managers.

The second category, transition from commander to sensemaking facilitator, supports complexity leadership theory. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argue that leadership in complex adaptive systems should enable learning, creativity, and adaptive capacity rather than merely impose order. Participants in this study gradually reconstructed their role around creating interpretive clarity rather than issuing instructions. This is consistent with Weick's (1995) view of organizing as sensemaking, where actors coordinate action by constructing plausible interpretations of ambiguous situations. Managers in self-organizing systems became facilitators of shared meaning, helping teams connect local autonomy with broader organizational purpose. This finding also aligns with plural leadership scholarship, which emphasizes that leadership is distributed across interactions rather than monopolized by formal leaders (Denis et al., 2012).

The third category, trust and vulnerability as managerial capacities, contributes to leadership theory by emphasizing the emotional labor of non-control. Trust was not merely a value endorsed by participants; it was experienced as a difficult discipline. Managers had to tolerate anxiety, resist premature intervention, and allow teams to learn through action. This finding resonates with shared leadership literature, which suggests that distributed influence depends on mutual confidence, interdependence, and willingness to share responsibility (Pearce & Conger, 2003). However, the present study adds a phenomenological dimension by showing how trust is lived by managers as vulnerability. Leadership beyond control requires the manager to remain accountable while accepting that outcomes emerge through collective agency. This can be psychologically demanding because the manager must detach responsibility from domination.

The fourth category, boundary work in decentralized accountability, demonstrates that self-organization does not mean structurelessness. This finding supports Lee and Edmondson's (2017) argument that self-managing organizations decentralize authority systematically rather than simply removing hierarchy. Participants emphasized that teams needed clear boundaries, decision rights, priorities, and escalation mechanisms. The

manager's role shifted from controlling decisions to designing the conditions under which responsible decisions could occur. This finding is also consistent with Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2018) argument that adaptive organizations require enabling leadership capable of balancing entrepreneurial emergence with operational coherence. Managers in this study became boundary workers who protected autonomy while maintaining alignment.

The fifth category, emergence of a post-control managerial identity, indicates that successful adaptation involved a positive reconstruction of managerial selfhood. Managers did not merely accept the loss of control; they developed a new identity centered on stewardship, facilitation, protection, and systemic awareness. This finding extends Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves by showing how managers experiment with alternative leadership identities in decentralized systems. Through repeated practice, feedback, and reflection, participants moved from provisional enabling behaviors to a more stable post-control identity. This identity was not passive. It involved active work: asking better questions, clarifying boundaries, connecting teams, protecting autonomy from external pressure, and sustaining organizational purpose. Therefore, leadership beyond control should not be confused with managerial withdrawal.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it adds a phenomenological account of managerial identity transformation to research on self-managing organizations, which has often focused more on structure than lived experience. Second, it clarifies the paradox that managers in self-organizing systems must lead without recentralizing control. Third, it identifies post-control managerial identity as a key condition for sustaining decentralized organizing. The results suggest that self-organization is not only an organizational design challenge but also an identity transition. Without identity transformation, managers may either reassert control in subtle ways or retreat from necessary enabling work. With identity transformation, they can become stewards of conditions that support distributed agency.

The findings also have implications for organizations attempting to implement agile, decentralized, or self-managing structures. Structural redesign alone is insufficient if managers continue to interpret authority through the lens of command. Organizations must support managers through the emotional, cognitive, and relational transition from control to enablement. This may involve leadership development programs focused on identity work, reflective practice, facilitation skills, boundary design, and tolerance of ambiguity. It may also require redefining performance evaluation systems so that managers are rewarded not for being indispensable but for increasing team capability, clarity, and responsible autonomy.

The study's first limitation is that it was conducted with a relatively small sample of 22 managers in Tehran-based organizations. Although this sample was appropriate for phenomenological inquiry and theoretical saturation was achieved, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all managers or all self-organizing systems. The second limitation concerns sectoral concentration. Most participants worked in knowledge-intensive, technology-oriented, consulting, or creative-service environments, where self-organization may be more feasible than in highly regulated, industrial, or public-sector organizations. The third limitation is that the study relied on managers' self-reported experiences. Although phenomenology privileges lived experience, future studies could enrich the findings through observations, team-member interviews, document analysis, and longitudinal tracking of managerial behavior.



Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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