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THE SCIENCE OF SPEAKING UP

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Conventional wisdom suggests that if we see something, we should say something, whether this involves sharing our own ideas, challenging someone else's ideas that may need correcting, or calling attention to behavior that has negatively affected others. In reality, too many people bypass the "speaking-up moment" and remain silent. This is because there are three roadblocks to speaking up: 1) *ambiguity* about whether speaking up is appropriate, 2) *asymmetrical power dynamics* that lead to fear of sanction from those with more power, and 3) *social threat,* including concerns about being mischaracterized as a troublemaker or being retaliated against. The stress that results from the chronic stifling of speaking-up behavior can exact negative physiological and psychological consequences on employees. This paper describes the science behind why individuals often do not speak up — either when they see an opportunity for improvement or when they see something troubling. It also provides strategies to enable speaking-up moments so that employees, leaders, and organizations can thrive.

The Science of Speaking Up

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Key takeaways:

1. When faced with opportunities to share new ideas, or when encountering the questionable decisions or behaviors of others, employees often bypass moments to speak up because they struggle to know *when* and *how* to do it productively.
2. Common roadblocks to speaking up include ambiguity, asymmetrical power dynamics, and social threat.
3. Those whose ideas, decisions, or behaviors are challenged also experience threat states that can make them unreceptive to the challenger's perspective.
4. Both potential speakers and those who are challenged can learn conversational approaches intended to minimize the threat the other person might experience.
5. Leaders can facilitate a culture of speaking up, often described as a culture of psychological safety, by acknowledging speaking-up moments, by role modeling receiving challenges by inviting input from employees without expressing defensiveness and without retaliation, and by establishing organizational supports that empower speaking up.

In 2005, 37-year-old Elaine Bromiley, a married mother of two, entered the hospital for routine sinus surgery. Not too long into the procedure, Elaine's airway became obstructed. The three experienced surgeons in the operating room proceeded to insert a tube into her trachea to attempt to open her airway. The surgeons continued their attempts for many critical minutes despite suggestions from two nurses that could have changed the course of events. One nurse retrieved a tracheostomy kit from another room and informed the surgeons that a kit was available. The kit would have provided another means by which to open Elaine's airway. The surgeons ignored her. Another nurse entered the room, immediately noticed that Elaine was in distress, left the operating room, and called the intensive care unit. Once she ascertained that space was available in the ICU, she informed the surgeons that the ICU had a bed for Elaine. According to the nurse's account, the doctors looked at her as if she were overdramatizing the situation. As a consequence, the nurse canceled the hold on the bed in the ICU. In the end, Elaine sustained severe brain damage and died. During the formal inquiry into what happened, the nurses reported that they knew Elaine was in distress and knew how to handle the situation but did not know how to speak with the surgeons in a way that the surgeons would listen to them (Harmer, 2005).

What transpired in the case of Elaine Bromiley epitomizes the dire consequences that can result from a lack of communication in work environments, especially ones that favor hierarchy and tacitly discourage speaking up to authority. Unfortunately, the problems at the center of Elaine's case are not isolated but occur on a daily basis, not just in operating rooms but in all places of work.

Indeed, numerous surveys and research studies document situations in which employees are aware of issues and problems in the workplace, observe questionable behavior, witness wrongdoing, or notice errors in decision-making by their superiors that could have dire consequences (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Schwartz & Wald, 2003). Instead of asking for clarification, providing corrective information, or even challenging a decision — with the intent to create (organizational) change and improvement — they remain silent, bypassing a "speaking-up moment" (Edmondson, 1999). Though conventional wisdom says that if we see something, we should say something, in reality most people keep their mouths shut (Morrison, 2001; Nembard & Edmondson, 2011). This paper describes why there are challenges to speaking up and then explains what leaders can do to reduce these barriers and build healthier workplaces.

Speaking up and different roles in "speaking-up moments"

Speaking up in the workplace, or "employee voice" as it is called in the scientific literature, is described as the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, or concerns about work-related issues with the intent to improve rather than to merely criticize organizational processes (Morrison, 2011; 2014). Employee silence, on the contrary, is defined as the conscious withholding of issues and concerns that could be useful or relevant to share (Morrison, 2014).

We propose here that acts of speaking up occur on a continuum, consisting of (1) sharing your ideas, (2) questioning other people's decisions, and (3) challenging other people's behavior. These three types of speaking up have much in common, with the first being easier and the last being the most challenging. We propose that organizations need to do work to make all these types of speaking up easier for all employees and that focusing on speaking up across the continuum creates habits that make the more challenging conversations more likely to occur.

When an organization has people speaking up across the continuum, ideas will be shared more readily, better decisions will be made, accidental bias will be mitigated more actively, people will feel more included, and innovations will happen faster, making organizations more adaptive and agile. On top of this, poor behaviors will be addressed earlier, resulting in fewer poor performers or poor managers, and serious ethical and harassment issues will be caught before they become true problems.

When employees recognize a speaking-up moment and voice their concerns, ideas, or suggestions, they are not complaining. Rather, they are seeking to improve a situation by bringing attention to it. At the same time, through speaking up, employees may fundamentally challenge the status quo in

an organization and question the decisions and behaviors of those with higher formal authority. Because this may cause conflict and friction, people often remain silent or hesitate to speak up.

We specify the three types of roles individuals can assume during speaking-up moments. The first role is the person being spoken up to — what we term the "actor," a person who makes a decision or engages in questionable or inappropriate behavior that has a potentially unintended negative impact on an individual, a team, or the business. Alternatively, an actor's decision or behavior can be considered questionable if someone perceiving it doesn't understand what was meant, or said, or the rationale behind it. The actor who commits a questionable behavior or decision may do so without a bad intention in general and may not know or believe he or she has done something wrong. The second role is what we call the "receiver," the target or the person or people affected by the behavior. The third role is what we call the "observer," and this individual is a third-party person who has observed the behavior but is not the target of it. A potential speaker who voices an idea or challenges the actor may be either a receiver or an observer.

Pathways to silence in a speaking-up moment

From a psychological perspective, there are two primary pathways to silence. The first pathway occurs because of automatic, implicit processes, whereas the second pathway occurs because of conscious, explicit processes. Accordingly, researchers distinguish between spontaneous, in-the-moment decisions to speak up and decisions that result from contemplation (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009). They contend that automatic, implicit beliefs tend to be at play during "in the moment" situations at work, when employees either remain silent or speak up (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009).

Generally, implicit processes are shaped by the "taken-for-granted beliefs" or implicit beliefs that often dictate individuals' behavior (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Implicit beliefs tend to operate below conscious awareness, whereby individuals hold a belief and act automatically as a result of that belief. These beliefs develop through personal experience and through observing others (Anderson & Lindsay, 1998). For instance, children typically learn from elders how to talk to those with authority, which can then inform their behavior as

adults. Moreover, individuals develop conceptual frameworks around how they are supposed to comport themselves when they interact with someone higher in authority (Fiske, 1992). Because of implicit beliefs such as needing to be deferential to authority or not embarrassing superiors in front of others, employees may fail to speak up.

In contrast, conscious, explicit processes tend to be at play when employees have time to contemplate which path to choose and also when they feel compelled to make a choice. This can be thought of as the conscious weighing of the costs versus benefits of speaking up. For example, research has shown that employees tend to express apprehension over the thought of proposing a new idea to their boss because they assume their boss is attached to the current state of affairs and will take offense at the new proposal (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Ultimately, employees' speaking-up behavior can be shaped by implicit or consciously held beliefs, and both pathways can undermine speaking up.

Roadblocks to speaking up

There are three primary drivers of employee silence identified in our research: *ambiguity, asymmetrical power dynamics,* and *social threat.*

Ambiguity

Ambiguity comes into play when people don't know whether the episode they saw or experienced is something worth addressing and, if so, whether they're the ones who should address it. Employees often maintain their silence because they witness fellow employees remaining silent in the face of questionable behavior or error-filled decision-making.

The phenomenon in which a group of individuals witnesses a situation yet does or says nothing about it is called the *bystander effect*. Remarkably, research has found that the more people who witness a negative event, the lower the chance that anyone will step in and speak up (Darley & Latané, 1968; Fischer et al., 2011; Rutkowski, Gruder, & Romer, 1983). This is because bystanders (i.e., observers) often struggle to know *when* and *if* to speak up. Indeed, when they look around and see others who are not doing anything to intervene, they may assume that nothing is wrong, that someone else will handle it, or that the situation is less worrisome than they originally perceived. Researchers call this "diffusion of responsibility" (Darley & Latané, 1968). The term applies when responsibility to intervene is not definitively assigned to one person but instead is shared among many people, making it unclear who is responsible for stepping in and speaking up (Darley & Latané, 1968). The outcome of diffusion of responsibility tends to be that no one does anything.

Another phenomenon that affects individuals' willingness to speak up is called *pluralistic ignorance*. Pluralistic ignorance occurs when individuals assume that others around them have an opinion that is the opposite of their own (Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Buckley, 2007; Prentice & Miller, 1996). As a result, they convince themselves that while they just witnessed questionable, inappropriate, or unethical behavior, others around them did not perceive the situation in the same way. This can introduce ambiguity and self-doubt about what "really" happened and decrease the likelihood the individual will say something.

Power dynamics

Researchers have observed that receivers of, and observers to, questionable decisions or behavior often downplay them (Darley & Latané, 1968; Milliken et al., 2003; Rutkowski et al., 1983) for a range of reasons related to power, or the lack thereof. For example, receivers and observers of organizational problems may fear being labeled a troublemaker or complainer. They might experience feelings of futility, where they believe that if they speak up, it will not make a difference — leaders will not listen to them. They might be afraid of damaging a relationship with a more powerful colleague, where trust, respect, or support will be lost. And — perhaps most important — they might fear retaliation, which could result in less desirable job assignments, being passed over for promotion, or even the loss of a job (Milliken et al., 2003).

Organizations that implicitly or explicitly discourage speaking up perpetuate cultures of silence and fear. The *model of organizational silence* describes an environment in which employees, based on their observations of the workplace, craft a shared narrative in which it is either dangerous or futile to speak up (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). As previously

mentioned, research suggests that power, status, or authority hierarchies and fear of sanction from those above pose a major barrier to speaking up (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Weiss, Kolbe, Grote, Spahn, & Grande, 2017). Two workplace environments, the operating room and the airplane cockpit, are particularly noted for their hierarchical and potentially silence-inducing structures.

Consequently, there is a relatively extensive literature that discusses the consequences of hierarchical workplaces (Pattni et al., 2019). Research in these domains frequently finds that the most common roadblock to speaking up for members in lower power positions is, in fact, the hierarchical environment of the organization. For example, recordings from cockpits illustrate how captains ignore the tepid corrective suggestions from copilots who are lower in power (Pattni et al., 2019).

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Add gender into the mix and the tableau becomes more complex. For example, one study investigated how the gender of the lead physician in a simulated medically critical situation (similar to that of Elaine Bromiley) influenced whether and how respiratory therapists spoke up to the lead physician (Pattni et al., 2017). The results showed that the respiratory therapists (23 women and six men) spoke up to the female lead physicians more frequently than they did male lead physicians. Moreover, they spoke up in a more confident and direct manner.

In considering these results, we acknowledge the myriad and complex layers inherent in the intersections of speaking up to authority, power, gender (e.g., Richardson & Taylor, 2009), race (e.g., Richardson & Taylor, 2009), and other identities, such as sexual orientation (e.g., Galupo & Resnick, 2016). An in-depth discussion of these identities as they relate to speaking up and power lies beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, we encourage and look forward to further study of these important topics, as such research can aid organizations in creating less hierarchical work environments and thereby maximize the likelihood of speaking up.

Social threat

Why is speaking up so threatening for receivers and observers (potential speakers) as well as actors (the people being challenged)? The reason is that our brains perceive and respond to social threats and rewards in ways that are similar to how we process physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Humans are social creatures, and the threat created in a speaking-up situation creates a perceived risk to relationships and to group membership.

Under threat, the prefrontal cortex — the area for executive functioning that facilitates planning, rationalizing, decision-making, and problem-solving — can experience reduced capacity, because the limbic system is attempting to process the threat (Arnsten, 2009). The limbic system describes a set of areas of the brain believed to participate in processing our emotional responses. Experiencing threat heightens momentary alertness but decreases our ability to see issues clearly, work with others, and think analytically (Elliot, 2008). A taxed prefrontal cortex might even leave people feeling tongue-tied, where they can't even think of the words they want to say or they have trouble forming the words in their mouths. The *thought* of speaking up to authority, let alone *actually* speaking up to authority, can induce such threat states and make it difficult to utilize our prefrontal cortex.

We must not forget that speaking up, and its accompanying threat states, can affect not only potential speakers (i.e., receivers and observers) but also actors — the people being challenged about their behavior or decision-making. Actors may have the power to either encourage further speaking up from potential speakers, by being open to feedback, or to silence them by signaling displeasure or defensiveness. It can, of course, be difficult for actors

to receive the problem-focused messages they are hearing in a constructive and nonthreatening way (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). This means that in practice, actors may struggle to respond without acting defensively when others speak up to them, as they often feel threatened or perceive it as disloyal behavior (Burris, 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). How, then, can employees and leaders learn to conduct more effective speaking-up conversations?

How to Create a Culture of Speaking Up

Ways to reduce threat in a speaking-up conversation

Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking involves the ability to mentalize or to infer the mental states of others as well as one's own mental states (Frith & Frith, 2006). It also requires the ability to understand that another person's feelings and beliefs are separate from one's own. A region of the brain that is critical for perspective-taking is the medial prefrontal cortex. Researchers speculate that this region helps people mentalize and predict the actions others might take (Frith & Frith, 2006; Mitchell, Macrae, & Banaji, 2006).

Mentalizing or perspective-taking helps those involved in a challenging conversation to separate their personal, subjective experience from what the other person meant to say or do and to attempt to understand both the impact and the intent. From this standpoint, those who are speaking up can reassure those they are challenging that there is no assumption of any negative *intent*. They can then clarify their goal for the conversation. In the process, they can focus on the specific situation or problem, sharing their *perception* of what occurred and inviting the actor to share his or hers as well. These approaches can help to establish common ground and diminish threat.

Providing social rewards

The SCARF® Model delineates five primary types of threat experienced by *both potential speakers and actors* that need to be managed in challenging conversations to make conversations more productive (Rock, 2008). These primary triggers of threat (and reward) in the brain are status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness (Rock, 2008). Understanding this model helps us to organize and anticipate the different domains of threat experienced during speaking-up interactions by *both* parties in the conversation. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that any conversation can contain some or all of the SCARF® threats to each individual. Through perspective-taking, those involved in a speaking-up conversation can anticipate the SCARF® threats that the other person is most likely to experience and take steps to avoid them.

Below, we give some examples of how SCARF® provides a framework for understanding, anticipating, and mitigating threat. It is important to remember that addressing questionable behavior does not have to be approached with a problem-focus. When a conversation consists only of emotional charge, it does not allow for solutions or progress to be made. Again, the key is to frame these challenging conversations in the most productive way, which the language of SCARF® enables us to do. Threats can be managed by compensating for them directly with SCARF® rewards.

Status: *Example threats*

Status refers to one's sense of relative standing in a group. To illustrate, an employee who is contemplating whether to speak up to a boss might think, "I'm afraid of negative career consequences, like not being given the prime projects, if I speak up," while the manager may be thinking, "Who is this person to tell me how to run my department? I'm the decision-maker."

Status: *Example rewards*

The employee might begin by highlighting his or her respect for the manager in other aspects of his or her work.

» The manager could express admiration for the employee's courage in speaking up about the issue.

Certainty: *Example threats*

Certainty refers to one's ability to predict outcomes. A leader who has just been spoken up to by an employee might think, "I'm not sure if this is a serious issue or how to respond appropriately." At the same time, the employee

may be thinking, "Where will this conversation go once I initiate it?"

Certainty: *Example rewards*

Employees could offer their perspective on how leaders could take action to respond appropriately. ("What I'm hoping you might be willing to do is X.")

» Leaders could share their thinking on their next steps with the employees and offer to check back in with them at a later date.

Autonomy: *Example threats*

Autonomy refers to one's perception of control. In this instance, an employee who is about to speak up might think, "This situation might go out of control if I upset this person," and the peer who is being spoken up to might feel as if they are being told what to do by someone without the authority to do so.

Autonomy: *Example rewards*

The employee speaking up could begin by asking for permission to share his or her perspective about the decision or behavior.

» The peer could ask the employee for options on how to handle the situation better in the future.

Relatedness: *Example threats*

Relatedness refers to the extent to which one is in line with group norms or part of the in-group. For example, an employee who feels compelled to speak up might hesitate and think, "I'm afraid they will hate me if I speak up," and the actor may be wondering, "Who else on the team has been discussing this? Am I being attacked by everyone I trusted here?"

Relatedness: *Example rewards*

The actor could reassure the employee that he or she is grateful for the feedback and that their relationship is stronger because of it.

» The employee could assure the actor that he or she really cares and has only the actor's best interests at heart in speaking up.

Fairness: *Example threats*

Fairness refers to one's perception that a fair exchange has occurred. To illustrate, a leader who has just been challenged might think, "I'm not being treated fairly — I'm being accused of something I never intended and no one is seeing my point of view," and the speaker may be upset and feel as if he or she is always the one who is expected to speak up and no one else does.

Fairness: *Example rewards*

Speakers could say they are sharing only their own perspective and would like to hear the perspectives of leaders as well since they may not have the full picture.

» Leaders could say they wish more people would speak up and begin to openly encourage it in team meetings.

When leaders and employees alike understand the threat responses that those speaking up and those who have been spoken up to might experience, they can devise strategies to defuse them through the proactive use of social rewards.

An example of perspective-taking and SCARF® management: The two-challenge rule

The two-challenge rule — an operationalized communication system used in cockpit crews — may help employees to speak up constructively and calmly through a combination of threat reduction and perspective exchange. The rule consists of two consecutive challenges, whereby an *advocacy* (an observation or a personal opinion) is paired with an *inquiry* (a request for the other person's thoughts). The pairing of advocacy and inquiry maximizes the receptiveness of the actor who is receiving the messages while reducing threat on the part of the potential speaker.

For example, an employee could challenge his or her manager first by saying, "I'm afraid that our new marketing strategy may not be as effective because we are not targeting all age groups" (advocacy), which is followed by an inquiry, "I wonder how you see it?" (Argyris, 1977). If the manager does not adequately acknowledge this challenge, the two-challenge rule then consists of a second challenge (again pairing an advocacy with an inquiry): "I am concerned that we will lose many of our older customers because our research shows they do not use the two social media channels we've chosen as much as our younger customers do (advocacy). What do you think about this (inquiry)?" Research has shown that using this communication method can improve decision-making in critical situations not only in cockpit crews but also in surgical teams, where the fear of backlash resulting from speaking up is especially high (Pian-Smith et al., 2009).

What leaders can do to make it safer for employees to speak up

It is incumbent upon leaders to appreciate how hard it is for employees to speak up and to proactively facilitate a speaking-up culture (Edmondson, 2004). They can do this by 1) acknowledging speaking-up moments, 2) role modeling receiving challenges by inviting input from employees without expressing defensiveness, and 3) establishing organizational supports that empower speaking up.

Acknowledge speaking-up moments

Leaders can increase speaking up by encouraging employees to share ideas or to challenge questionable decisions and behaviors through the lens of what is *right* as opposed to the lens of what is *easy*. Research has demonstrated the importance of the lens or frame through which we form evaluations and assessments. Specifically, researchers tasked participants with evaluating a range of behaviors, such as putting away money for retirement and admitting to having told a lie, through either a moral (what is *right*) or pragmatic (what is *easy*) lens (Van Bavel, Packer, Haas, & Cunningham, 2012). The results showed that when evaluating actions through a moral lens, evaluations were faster, more extreme, and more strongly associated with universal prescriptions that nobody or everybody should engage in the action (Van Bavel et al., 2012). Accordingly, leaders can encourage employees to ask themselves: What is the *right thing for me to do* in this situation? What is the right thing for me, my team, and/or the organization? When forming judgments using this lens, employees are more likely to be decisive and confident about speaking up and are less likely to delay or avoid a conversation just because it's difficult or requires more effort. Leaders can help to foster a culture of speaking up by inspiring employees to do the right thing, even when it is not easy.

Another condition that empowers employees to speak up is when they feel fully identified with a group (i.e., the organization). Though this may seem counterintuitive, research has shown that people who express a robust affiliation with their group are more likely to speak up when they feel that norms or observed behaviors could harm the group collectively but not when norms or behaviors could harm them personally as individuals (Packer & Chasteen, 2010). Therefore, when individuals strongly identify with the group and are able to see themselves as agents of change, they will be able to positively influence themselves, their colleagues, and their organizations.

In addition, recent research studying communication between team leaders and members of healthcare teams has shown that inclusive leader communication affected whether team members spoke up with suggestions, ideas, or concerns during emergency patient treatment (Weiss, Kolbe, Grote, Spahn, & Grande, 2018). For example, leaders' use of collective pronouns (we, us, our) promoted team members' speaking up.

Role model welcoming challenge

Leaders can also solicit input and practice listening in a nondefensive manner — this signals receptivity toward those speaking up. Research has shown that willingness to speak up, especially to authority, depends primarily on employees' perceptions of supervisor characteristics related to "approachability" (e.g., "I don't know how my boss will react when I take a concern to him or her.") and "responsiveness" (e.g., "My boss takes action to correct the concerns that I speak to him or her about.") (Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992).

Also, inviting subordinates to voice their opinions and appreciating when they shared raised the likelihood of their speaking up by about 26% (Weiss et al., 2018). These findings show the simple and yet very effective communication tools that leaders can employ to facilitate speaking up.

Empower speaking up

To establish processes that create a system of organizational support for speaking up, particularly when the obstacles to speaking up are salient, leaders can implement numerous measures.

First, leaders can define explicit procedures for speaking up. For instance, in meetings and in conversations, leaders can ensure that others speak before they do. Second, leaders can establish an ombuds office where employees may discreetly express their concerns in confidence. Third, leaders can designate a neutral party to review and report employee concerns anonymously to leadership (Milliken et al., 2003).

To boost morale and engender employee trust, however, employees would need to see leadership

instituting organizational *and* individual behavior change. Research suggests that if employees feel organizational support exists for raising issues (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998) and that remedial action will be taken (Miceli & Near, 1992; Rudman, Borgida, & Robertson, 1995; Withey & Cooper, 1989), they will be more likely to speak up. Lastly, leaders can assign teams within their organizations to review past interactions with a focus on teaching lower-status members how to effectively speak up to higher-status team members (Weiss et al., 2017). Implementing any combination of these systems could create an environment in which employees feel safer and more empowered to speak up.

Conclusion

Findings from research suggest that employees feel reluctant to speak up to share new ideas and when faced with problematic decisions or questionable behavior. Reasons for this include fear of ridicule, fear of retribution, fear of damaging a relationship, or the belief that nothing will change if they do speak up. Ambiguity, asymmetrical power relations, and social threat often cause employees to either not notice a speaking-up moment or rationalize it away, leading to individual failure to voice or sometimes even to a collective bystander effect.

Insights from the science of perspective-taking and The SCARF® Model provide recommendations as to how employees and leaders can engage in challenging conversations in ways that reduce conflict on all sides. Leaders can facilitate a culture of speaking up by acknowledging speaking-up moments, by inviting input from employees without expressing defensiveness and without retaliation, and by creating work environments in which employees feel safe and empowered to speak up (Weiss et al., 2018). Adopting these strategies, employees and leaders alike can cocreate workplaces that view ideas, decisions, and behavior through the lens of the *right* thing to do, to empower and embrace speaking-up behavior.

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