An Examination of the Dynamics of Organizational Culture and Values-based Leader Identities and Behaviors: One Company's Experience

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This in-depth case study utilized grounded theory methodology to discover how a large privately-owned manufacturing firm in Northeastern USA develops values-based leaders, particularly from minority populations. Over 18 months, interviews with 35 leaders from five levels explored the perceived influence of the environment on leaders' behaviors and identities. Findings suggest organizational culture and leaders can influence leaders' behaviors and values-based leader identities. Recommendations for research and practice are offered.

Keywords: Values-based Leadership, Leader Development, Organizational Culture

The dynamic changes in the business environment brought on by international competition, increasing demands for quality and product development, and the shift from a manufacturing to a service-oriented economy have greatly affected how American companies manage work and workers (Judy & D'Amico, 1997). Since March 2001, U.S. employers have downsized almost three million workers (Mandel, 2004), and outsourced overseas over 400,000 more (Tyson, 2004). Middle-level managers were one of the casualties of this reduction in the workforce.

With fewer staff in middle management—the historically fertile ground for identifying and developing future leaders—organizations will need to change their approach to management selection and development. No longer is there an incremental series of developmental experiences at various management levels available for the development of senior leaders. For many organizations, the search for potential leaders now will require consideration of employees from lower levels in the organization—often members of populations traditionally underrepresented in management positions (e.g., minorities, individuals without college degrees)— as well as more intentional development through fewer management levels.

Some companies are combining their concern for developing their future leaders with the realization that they need to create new structures and processes to remain competitive in the ever-changing global marketplace (Vicere & Fulmer, 1997). These companies realize that the "core purpose of strategic leadership development is…to cultivate and refine the managerial talents [at all levels] needed to move the organization toward its strategic objectives" (Vicere & Fulmer, p.12). It is critical that these new leaders share the organization's stated values. This was particularly highlighted in the recent corporate scandals and tales of corruption at Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, and Haliburton. Once again, our attention is called to the issue of ethics in business.

Perhaps in response to these moral failures, recent popular business books have extolled the virtues of leading a business based on core values (Collins & Porras, 2004; Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 1995). This concept of *values-based leadership* (House, 1996) has come to be associated with transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) and charismatic leadership (House, 1977) approaches, wherein shared values play an important role in motivating followers to higher levels of performance (Brown, 2002). For transformational leadership, internalization of the leader's values by followers is most important, whereas charismatic leadership relies on personal identification. However, Brown's recent study of employee acceptance of values transmitted by leaders found that there is very little, if any, transmission of values from leader to follower. Assuming, of course, that the organization's leaders share the company's values, how, then, can these senior leaders influence the values and subsequent decisions and behaviors of employees and, particularly for this study, newly promoted leaders? This is an especially important question since values are organized and prioritized into systems (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) which give purpose, meaning, and direction to our lives, and guide different attitudes and behaviors (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Values inform the decisions managers and leaders make every day.

This study contends that organizational leaders, through their communications and behaviors (i.e., authentic relationships), activate values-based identities in aspiring leaders that report to them, such that these new leaders make behavior choices that more closely align with the values of the senior leaders and, ideally, those of the organization. This assertion necessarily requires a brief introduction to leader identities and what Gecas (2000) calls *value identities*, which arise when "individuals conceive of themselves in terms of the values they hold" (p. 96). Embracing new cognitions of one's self-concept as a leader is fundamental to this transition into leader roles. The

formation of leader identities involves not only the role identity (identity theory) of an individual, but also their social identity (Hall, 2004; London, 2002). An integration of these theories into a discussion of a more holistic and overarching personal identity posits that individuals reflexively experience themselves according to a hierarchical salience of values (value identities), which in turn influences their behavior choices (Hitlin, 2003).

According to authorities in leader identity, links have been empirically tested or hypothesized between values and personal identity (Hitlin, 2003), organizational cultures and identity (Lord & Brown, 2001), and leaders and subordinate values (Lord & Brown, 2001). Personal identity is one's sense of self comprised of multiple identities, often tied to discrete social roles (Hitlin, 2003). So, leader identity refers to how one sees oneself as a leader. According to Schein (1992) an organization's culture can be defined as shared assumptions and beliefs that guide the behaviors of the group members. With this understanding, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of an organization's values-based culture on the identity formation of leaders and their behaviors, especially leaders from under-represented groups. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory approach was used in this case study of a large privately-owned manufacturing firm located in Northeastern USA. The discovery of theory was grounded in the extensive data collected in a field study of the dynamic process of leader identity development.

Problem Statement and Questions

In this age of high consumer expectations of corporate social behavior, companies need to know how to instill organizational values in their leaders in such a way as to motivate values-based behavior down through the organization. The intent of this study is to discover new insights and understandings of how an organization's cultural factors, specifically values and leadership, influence an individual's transition into a new role as a values-based leader in the workplace. The following three research questions concern the influence of the organization's culture (operationalized as a values-based organizational culture and its leadership at all levels) on the development of new leader values-based identities and behaviors (each question corresponds to one side of Figure 1 below):

RQ1. What perceived influence do values-based organizational cultures and leadership have on the self-described behavior of leaders who are in low- to mid-level positions?

RQ2. What perceived influence do values-based organizational cultures and leadership have on the self-described identity formation of new leaders, particularly with respect to their values-orientation?

RQ3. What perceived influence do values-based leader identities have on the self-described behaviors of leaders who are in low- to mid-level positions?

Theoretical Framework

The study of leadership necessarily involves consideration of the larger social system of the organization. How an individual leader develops into a leadership role is influenced by internal factors as well as external environmental factors. The process of how we interpret our environment and come to know and act in our world is derived from Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, or social cognitive theory. According to this theory, "human agency operates within an interdependent causal structure involving triadic reciprocal causation" (Bandura, 1997, pp. 5-6) between the individual (i.e., cognitive, affective, and biological events), his or her behavior, and the environment. This study incorporates Bandura's theory into a theoretical framework (see Figure 1 below) in which the individual's *leader identity* (Cf. Bandura's Individual or 'P'), behavior (B), and values-based organizational culture/leadership (Cf. Bandura's Environment or 'E') consisting of the organization's values-orientation and its values-based leadership, are linked in a similar triadic reciprocal causation model.
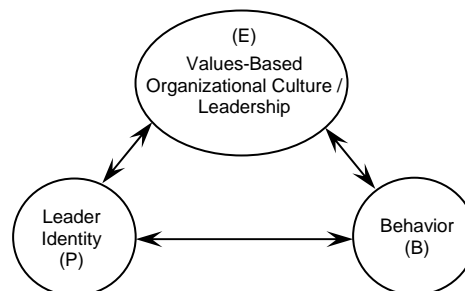

Figure 1. Values-Based leader identity theoretical framework**.** From *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory* (1st ed., p. 24), by A. Bandura, 1986, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Copyright 1986 by Prentice-Hall, Inc. Adapted and used with permission.

Two fundamental assumptions are that "people in organizations are engaged in ongoing attempts to understand what is happening around them" (Gioia, 1986, p. 50) and individuals' identities are influenced by their environment. Thus, the pervasiveness and importance of values in organizational culture are fundamentally linked to the psychological process of identity formation in which individuals appear to seek a social identity that provides meaning and connectedness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to social identity theory, "people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories" (Ashforth & Mael, p. 20). This process is called social identification and entails the "perception of oneness with or belongingness to the social category or role" (Ashforth, 2001, p. 25). "Goals, rooted in a value system and a sense of personal identity, invest activities with meaning and purpose" (Bandura, 2001, p.8). Therefore, it is anticipated that those aspiring to leadership will seek to identify with and become part of the existing leader group, affecting their cognitions, values and behaviors. For Wojciszke (1989), value identities cannot influence behavior unless activated, and organizational leaders are in the ideal position to do so. It is proposed that leaders' value identities are instrumental guides for their values choices, and that organizational leaders can effect different values-based behaviors by activating new leaders' value identities.

Related Literature Review

Values and Leadership

Leadership is fundamentally a value-laden activity. Schwartz (1999) defined "values as conceptions of the desirable that guide the way social actors (e.g., organizational leaders, policy-makers, individual persons) select actions, evaluate people, and events, and explain their actions and evaluations" (p. 24). As values indicate how individuals are to adapt to the organization's needs, leaders not only must embrace them personally, they also need to be purveyors of these values to their subordinates.

Schwartz (1992) developed a theory about the structure of value systems by focusing on the motivation represented in each of 10 value types. According to his findings, values are aligned with two motivational dimensions. Using Rohan's (2000) new labels, the first dimension, *focus on opportunity* versus *focus on organization*, relates to conflicts between being motivated "to follow [one's] own intellectual and emotional interests in unpredictable and uncertain directions" or "to preserve the status quo and the certainty it provides in relationships with close others, institutions, and traditions" (Schwartz, p. 43). This motivational dimension relates to contemporary leaders' need to produce organizational change by developing and communicating a vision, and then, inspiring people to attain it (Kotter, 1990). Therefore, 2 of Schwartz' 10 value types sharing the same underlying dimension (i.e., focus on opportunity)—*seeking stimulation* (i.e., excitement, novelty and challenge) and *being self-directed* (i.e., a creative and curious independent thinker)—appear to be values related to success as a leader.

The second and most important dimension for this study Schwartz (1992) labeled *self-enhancement* versus *self-transcendence* and relates to the "conflict between concern for the consequences of own and others' actions for the self and concern for the consequences of own and others' actions in the social context [i.e., individual versus collective interests]" (Rohan, 2000, p. 260). Again, Rohan makes use of new labels—*focus on individual outcomes* versus *focus on social context outcomes*. This dimension has particular significance to organizational studies because its poles make a distinction between different value priorities that represent one of the key struggles facing many leaders today. The leader's challenge is to reconcile these tensions.

In recent years, leadership discussions have embraced a more social understanding of "leadership as a complex interaction between the leader and the social and organizational environment" (Fiedler, 1996, p. 241). According to this approach, leadership emerges out of the social systems and engages everyone in the community in a social process (Barker, 1997). Consequently, social context outcomes have taken on a more central place among the factors that leaders must consider in their decision-making processes. Thus, leading with a focus on social context outcomes, or self-transcendence, is a strategic leadership approach that organizations should strive to engender in their leaders. In a 1998 study of ethical contexts in organizations, Treviño, Butterfield, and McCabe found that egoism (operationalized as self-interest) had a negative relationship with organizational commitment and a positive relationship with unethical conduct. At the other end of the second dimension, there was a positive relationship between organizational commitment and benevolence to the employees and community. The authors of the study recommended that corporations need to counter the predominant value of self-interest in the global marketplace by proactively managing the ethical context of the organization. This study follows their suggestion as it examines the influence of organizational culture (operationalized as ethical, caring and supportive culture and leadership) on the development of newly promoted leaders' identities as values-based leaders.

Values and Organizational Culture

Organizational culture as shared assumptions and beliefs that guide group behaviors (Schein, 1992) suggests that individuals and organizations can share the same values. When values are shared, it is anticipated that the

individual is more likely to identify with the organization and be influenced by its values and norms (Chatman, 1989). Robert Haas, the chairman and CEO of Levi Strauss & Co., suggested that "the alignment between organizational values and personal values is the key driver of corporate success" (as cited in Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 1995, p. 83). Shared values constitute a significant component of an organization's culture and encourage efficient interactions between employees (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). From their values in organizations study of empirical literature published between 1987 and 1997, Meglino and Ravlin confirmed that value congruence has a positive relationship to affective outcomes and evaluations. They found this to be true for both actual and perceived congruence of values. Perceived value congruence positively correlated to such affective outcomes as satisfaction, commitment, and involvement and negatively with performance.

Leadership Influences

The influence leaders have on subordinates' values and behaviors is mediated by the nature of their relationships with employees. Leaders who cultivate trusting relationships through honesty and consistent behavior can influence their subordinates' values (Brown, 2002). George, Sims, McLean, and Mayer (2007) describe leaders who cultivate such relationships as individuals who know who they are (i.e. high self-awareness), they "demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish long-term, meaningful [trust-based] relationships and have the self-discipline to get results" (p. 130).

In his study of hospital administrators and their direct reports, Brown (2002) discovered that only certain values are transmitted by leaders and adopted by subordinates. A leader's espousal of values that focus on individual outcomes, such as, achievement and success, are commonplace and less likely to be noticed by employees compared to values that focus on the social context outcomes. Brown also found that when leaders behave consistently, "consistency-based trust" is developed with employees, and serves to convey the importance of conservatism values, such as, conformity and tradition. By consistently demonstrating the company's values in their behaviors and actions (e.g., how they treat their employees), employees not only learn the company values, they also come to understand and embrace them and incorporate them into their behaviors. Thus, by building trust-based, authentic relationships with their employees, it is possible for leaders to have an influence on their subordinates' values and behaviors.

Influence of organizational leadership on value identities and behaviors

Leaders hold a unique position of privilege in organizations (Brown, 2002). They have been characterized as sensegivers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and managers of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Therefore as determiners of which values are salient, organizational leaders can influence the behavior of the new leaders, especially through what behaviors they choose to reward or punish.

When we consider the development of values in new leaders, and particularly value identities, it is clear that their supervisors have significant influence. A wide range of psychological processes are impacted by an individual's self-concept, particularly those related to self-regulation (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In their theoretical article, Lord, Brown, and Freiberg (1999) suggested that leaders can influence subordinate's self-concepts. Higgins and Brendl's work on activation rules influencing judgments presents *priming* as temporarily increasing the salience and accessibility of some schemas within an individual's working self-concept more likely to be used, and *inhibiting* makes schemas less accessible and less likely to be used (as cited in Lord & Brown, 2004). Therefore, organizational leaders can prime different value identities according to which is appropriate for the particular context (e.g. individual outcomes versus social context outcomes). Such priming can occur through the organizational leader's words or actions within an authentic relationship.

Method

The primary source for data collection that was utilized in this case study was semi-structured format interviews. Corporate promotional literature and posters throughout the facilities provided useful support material regarding organizational values and objectives. Direct observation provided minimal additional data in the form of field notes.

The context for this case study is a second generation family-owned manufacturing firm built on the founding patriarch's strongly-held values—particularly valuing people and their development. These values are communicated to employees in myriad ways, such as, mission and value statements, organizational systems and procedures, rites and rituals, stories, legends and myths (Schein, 1992). Facing global competitive pressures, the company restructured in the mid-1990s. With fewer management levels to rise through, they needed to be more intentional about how they developed the kind of leader they wanted to take their company into the next millennium. As part of a strong promote-from-within culture the leader training function occurs at all levels, and intentionally develops leaders from under-represented populations.

Procedures

Semi-structured interviews lasting between 20 minutes and 1 hour and 27 minutes (with an average of 47

minutes) were conducted with 35 informants. The initial approach to the company involved the pilot study with five informants from one division who were selected by the plant manager from the population of approximately 180 leaders. The managers held positions ranging from cell leader (Level 1) to production manager (Level 4), providing data relevant for testing cross-level analysis of organizational culture and individual employee self-perceptions and behaviors as a leader. Data from the interviews were transcribed, reviewed, coded, and analyzed. The key themes and insights which emerged were included in the main study's interview protocol.

Sample. The Human Resources Department produced a list of all leaders across the entire organization promoted to managerial positions or joined the company in a managerial role within the past year (*N*=46). These criteria were used to ensure better recall of their developmental experiences. This study's focus on manufacturing leader development reduced the initial population list of 46 recently promoted leaders to 20 informants that were directly involved in manufacturing activities. As "samples in qualitative work are usually not wholly prespecified, but can evolve once fieldwork begins" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27), potential informants that were recommended during the study were pursued (e.g., three female leader informants were added to the original all-male informant sample). Finally, interviews were requested with seven additional senior leaders (designated as "upper management") to assist with validating and supporting the evolving themes. A full perspective on the values-based leader development process was possible as the informants came from all five management levels in manufacturing operations: 9 cell leaders (Level 1); 11 team supervisors (Level 2); 7 area managers (Level 3); 4 production managers (Level 4); and 4 senior leaders, including 3 from the corporate headquarters, and a plant manager (Level 5). Of the 27 lower-level leaders, 20 were from non-white backgrounds.

Interviews. Following the 5 pilot study interviews, the 28 semi-structured interviews (one was with a group of three senior executives for a total of 30 participants in the main study) were conducted. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, reviewed, summarized, and then made available to informants for corrections and adjustments. The data were continuously analyzed during the data collection phase and a period of time of further analysis occurred before returning for the last group of interviews seven months later. To test and confirm the findings upper management informants were interviewed. Follow-up interviews were also scheduled with four informants to verify, saturate or refine categories and their relationships. All interviews, except for the three corporate executives, were held in conference rooms in each of the plant facilities.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthy findings, the researcher must address the internal validity, external validity, and reliability of the data. The following methods commonly used in qualitative research (Merriam, 1988) were used to ensure internal validity of the data: triangulation, member checks, peer examination, and stating the theoretical orientation at the outset of the study. First, this study triangulated multiple sources of data: interview data, corporate promotional literature, and minimal additional data in the form of field notes from direct observation at the research site. Member checks involved sending a synthesis of the transcribed interview to each informant for content verification. Twenty-four (85.7%) of the 28 non-pilot study informants replied and indicated that the synthesis had captured the essence of the interviews. Seven offered revisions primarily to the wording and their communication style. Third, a peer evaluator coded a representative sample of three entire interview transcripts from across the hierarchy of one division. All identifiers were removed to protect the confidentiality of informants. The primary researcher met with the peer evaluator and discussed coding of the documents. Differences in language used to code themes were discussed and a common term or phrase was agreed upon for each. A 92.3% simple percentage agreement was achieved between the peer evaluator and researcher. To ensure external validity, rich descriptions of the research site and data collection and analysis were provided. Interview data were collected from across eight of the nine manufacturing divisions in the company. Though the data came primarily from three divisions, they can be considered multiple sources. In addition, an audit trail was maintained by recording accurate field notes, as well as, memos and notes during the analysis (Merriam, 1988). The audit trail helped to ensure reliability, as did presenting the investigator's position (the theory behind the study, the basis for selecting informants and a description of them).

Data Analysis

The constant comparison techniques of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory approach were used as the data were analyzed in search of the discovery of "theory from data systematically obtained from [the field]" (p.2). As part of this qualitative methodology, three phases of data analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were conducted. Coding memos, theoretical memos, and operational memos were each used to document emergent coding insights, including any theoretical and analytical insights and hypotheses, as well as to record procedural details (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 217).

Results

The almost 900 pages of interview transcripts were analyzed to discover key influence processes for each research question and corresponding side of the theoretical framework (see Figure 1). Due to space limitations, the key themes will be discussed briefly here (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Developing Values-Based Leaders by Research Question*

Influence process	Strategy and properties	Tactic
Q1. Environment→Behavior		
Culture	1. Strong values-based culture	a. Morning meetings
	- Prevalent	b. Posters
	- Consistent	c. Employee assistance program
		d. Recognition meetings
Leadership	1. Build authentic relationships	a. Role-model
	- Respect	b. Develop people's skills and values
	- Credibility	c. Help on the line
	- Service	d. Concern for welfare
		e. CEO communication
Q2. Environment→Identity		
Leadership	1. Build authentic relationships	a. One-on-One meetings
	- Respect	
	2. Prime new leader identity	a. Express leader potential
	- Open, honest communication	b. Give growth opportunities
		c. Role-model
		d. Coach/Mentor
Q3. Identity→Behavior	1. Activate new leader identity	a. Coach/Mentor
	- Supportive guidance	b. Give people-management opportunities

A consistent and pervasive values-driven culture introduced, educated, and reinforced the company's values to employees. In daily morning team meetings these values were discussed and sincere concern for employees' welfare and work experiences expressed (RQ1). An extensive employee assistance program further reinforced the employees' value to the company. Leaders influenced new leaders' behaviors (RQ1) through mutually respect, authentic relationships, words, actions, and role-modeling (i.e., helping on the line). Leaders also influenced leader identity formation (RQ2) in their one-on-one meetings, and authentic encouragement of the new leaders by initially telling them of their potential and coaching them through new leadership tasks. Finally, not only did these new leaders report that they were now developing values-based leaders below them (RQ3: identity influences behavior), they also reported, albeit anecdotal, that worker productivity was higher because of the company's values and employee treatment. As in all of the research questions, role-modeling of the company's values had a potent impact on employees' trust levels, particularly for immigrants and those for whom English was not their first language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The building of authentic relationships between leaders and employees is a critical factor in the successful saturation of a company's values across the organization. By relating sincerely, and with genuine care and concern, helping out employees with problems they encounter, leaders engender respect from their employees. They earn their workers' trust and have the credibility needed to lead their workers to achieve production goals. By meeting with their protégés on a regular basis, organizational leaders can impact their value identities. First, they can prime a new value identity by supporting and encouraging them to consider taking on a leadership role. Second they can provide valuable hands-on learning experiences to prepare them for the new leadership responsibilities. And finally, organizational leaders can develop effective people skills and the desired values as they coach the new leaders through the challenges they encounter dealing with people issues.

The leader's identity as a values-based leader also influences behavior. The findings of this study reveal that when these new leaders come into a new role identity their behaviors begin to reflect this new sense of self. For example, through the supervisor's role-modeling, coaching and encouragement, several informants came to see themselves as leaders who care for employees and find great pleasure in helping them develop, a perspective they did not bring when they were hired by the company. By valuing its people and helping them develop, this company

has awakened in many minority employees a vision of themselves as a leader—many for the first time—and encouraged them to embrace this new identity. Their contributions to the company, and to developing new employees below them, have contributed significantly to the company's success.

While issues of ethical decision-making did not emerge from the early interviews with these "inside" workers who only deal with internal colleagues, the values espoused and modeled by the company and its leadership are clearly adopted by leaders down the hierarchy. The values of honesty and treating people fairly and equally were mentioned in many interviews, suggesting that these leaders would be inclined to pursue the higher ground when dealing with ethical dilemmas. Further research will need to be done to determine if that is true.

This study has two primary limitations. First, it is a study of perceptions gleaned from self-reports through interviews. Though every effort was made to ensure informants that their data would be kept confidential, the very private and personal nature of the information requested may have led to informants being influenced by social desirability bias or the desire to conform to stated company values. Self-reports have been criticized as providing potentially inaccurate accounts. However, this methodology provides the best access to individual cognitions of identity and values perceptions. Second, data were collected from a large, privately-owned, union manufacturing environment in the Northeastern United States. The findings from this unique context are limited in their generalizability to other contexts.

Contribution to HRD

This study identified several key considerations that HRD professionals may find helpful for use in their talent management program and in preparing companies to expand to other countries. Developing a back-up bench of leaders down the entire organization is critical to organization-wide succession planning. The results of this study point to the importance of the quality of relationships between people in the organization. Several important considerations for developing authentic, trust-based relationships were presented. Such relationships are the key to leading the multi-cultural workforce. With increasing numbers of global operations, companies realize they need understand how to work with employees in such diverse sets of contexts. The training of indigenous leaders is critical to their success in the host country. As such, companies will need to grapple with organizational culture issues as they set up operations in other countries. Relationships are central to most non-Western countries. As multi-national corporations (MNC) expand their operations to new and different cultural contexts, understanding the value of relationships and the people in them for who they inherently are will provide an easier entry into the culture. It will also help the MNCs to align more closely with the rest of the global workforce.

An additional area of interest to the HRD field relates to training employees about the values of the company. Data from this study suggest that having a clearly articulated set of values—values that are rooted in the organizational ethos and that the leadership has deemed desirable—is crucial. As these principles will guide each and every decision, the company must make a concerted effort to communicate these values to the workforce. From new employee orientation to ongoing training to visible reminders placed throughout the buildings, these values must be evident to all. The most effective way, however, is when the leadership models these values daily.

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