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Reciprocal benefits, legacy and risk

Introduction

The role of the line manager is frequently cited as critical to the development of employees
and teams in the literature on workplace learning as "it is the supervisor as facilitator who
provides the link between individual and organisational learning" (MacNeil, 2004, p.251).
This 'line manager as facilitator of learning' view is articulated alongside the wider
devolvement of Human Resource activities to line managers (Armstrong, 2012, p.44) yet
managers are widely perceived as under-performing in this facilitator role (CIPD, 2013a).
The purpose of this study is two-fold: (a) to explore the validity of Ellinger and Bostrom's
(2002) study of managers' self-perception of their role as facilitators of employee learning
within learning oriented firms by applying the model in a different organisational context;
and (b) to identify whether managers' self-perceptions may be influenced by particular
factors within that industry context. This research was conducted in a large UK utilities firm
operating in a highly regulated industry where operational service and compliance depend
on high levels of technical knowledge and expertise among staff. The beliefs surfaced by the
line managers suggest that specific industry contexts may generate additional beliefs that
influence managers' self-perceptions of the priorities and importance of their role as
facilitators of learning.

Background literature

Learning in the Workplace
Workplace learning can be characterised as learning from everyday work activities involving
incidental and highly situated informal learning (Billett 2002; Ellinger and Cseh 2007). This
research explores incidents of "explicit informal learning" that take place consciously on the
part of the learner rather than incidental workplace learning that occurs as a "seamless web
of tacit, taken for granted socialisation" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 2). Workplace learning may
be planned and intentional yet still include aspects that are incidental, created as a by-
product of other activities and therefore constrained by "the nature of the task that
influenced its creation" (Ellinger, 1997, p. 35).

Workplace learning occurs within 'situated learning environments' where learners seek to
extend their knowledge by entering the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) of 'experts' in
the workplace (Vygotsky, 1978; Billett and Choy, 2013) to function at a point just above
their current level of capability (Zepeda, 2007, p.167).

Within these stretching learning environments, the learner's self-perception of their abilities
often determines their behaviour, thought patterns and emotional responses to challenging
situations. Thus the self-efficacy of the learner affects the activities they pursue and those
they avoid as too challenging (Bandura, 1982) and pointing to the importance of the level of

support and guidance provided for the learner through scaffolding (Bruner 1978) or observation and modelling (Bandura 1978), in what Feuerstein *et al* (1999) termed a Mediated Learning Environment (MLE). Billet (2011, p.182) draws parallels to the intentional human mediation of Feuerstein *et al*'s MLE when he questions the purposes and mechanisms of workplace learning.

In Billet's view there is often no 'stated syllabus' in the workplace but there will normally be specific purpose or intent to any workplace learning. Yet Corporate Executive Board (2009, p.12) research found that 65% of on-the-job learning was directed towards areas of low importance and 58% to areas with low levels of urgency. This may indicate a 'lag' between learner needs and the structure of workplace learning opportunities that highlights potential tensions between workplace cultures, structures and processes and individual learning goals and work objectives (Margaryan, *et al* 2013). Dirkx (1999, p.130) argues that, learners are "not completely passive", but are often "acted upon" by managers' perceptions of their learning needs which frequently privilege the needs of the organisation over those of the individual. However, for Dirkx, an effective and facilitative learning environment requires that "control of and power in the learning process rests with the learners" (Dirkz, 1999, p.130). In the context of workplace learning, agency and power does not rest with the organisation and 'management' alone as for learning to occur the learner must have accepted the need and acted on the opportunities for learning.

Billet (2002) argues that the analysis of workplace learning should focus on "the structuring of workplace activities [which] are often inherently pedagogic" (p.56-61). Hence, while acknowledging the distributed agency in workplace learning, this research focuses on the role of line managers as providers of learning opportunities and of guidance and support to employees.

The Role of Line Managers in Workplace Learning
Line managers play a critical role in learning and development within organisations by providing coaching and stimulating learning within teams (CIPD, 2007, p.4). However, this role of line managers is also shaped by "attitudinal, structural and cultural" factors that often result in the manager's role in learning being under-developed (Sambrook and Stewart, 2007, p.45). The CIPD (2013a, p.10-11) found that over the last five years, on-the-job training, in-house development programmes and coaching by line managers consistently rank as the most effective workplace learning activities yet they also found a year-on-year decline in perceptions of the effectiveness of the people development skills of line managers. A key contributing factor to the effectiveness of managers in their roles in facilitating such workplace learning interventions is the attitudes and beliefs of the managers themselves (O'Neil and Marsick 2014; Warhurst 2013) where they take on the role identity as a facilitator of learning as well as that of a manager.

Managerial beliefs on learning
Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) examined how managers perceived themselves to facilitate employee learning within learning oriented firms. Their research used critical incident technique to analyse the beliefs of managers identified as 'exemplary' at facilitating employee learning through an expert nomination process. They identified three major categories of beliefs:

1. Beliefs held by facilitators of learning about their roles and capabilities
2. Beliefs held by facilitators of learning about learning and the learning process
3. Beliefs held by facilitators of learning about learners

The authors used a conceptual model (Figure 1) adapted from the Campbell *et al*'s person-process-product model (1970) and Clawson's (1992, cited in Ellinger, 1997) person-role model to frame their analysis. The *person* in the model enacts a role, bringing with them their belief system which is influenced by their characteristics, abilities and developmental experiences. Once a learning episode had been initiated, managers enact behaviours based on their beliefs that, in turn, define their role as a facilitator of learning (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002, p. 151-152).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

They found that managers perceived their role as a manager and as a facilitator of learning to be distinct from one another with a "role-switching function" occurring between these two roles[1]. The manager role involved a more directive and controlling approach while a facilitative or coaching role privileged supportive, empowering and developmental interactions. The selection of roles largely depended on managers' perceptions of any given work situation (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002. p.157).

Ellinger and Bostrom (2002, p.169) argue that mental models influence what managers see as well as how they think and behave and suggested that the beliefs they identified (Figure 2) "provide insights into exemplary facilitators of learning".

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopted an 'abductive' research strategy involving the analysis of first order participant accounts to infer second order concepts (Blaikie, 2009) while ensuring the participants could recognise themselves within these accounts (Blaikie, 2009, p.90). Abductive research involves the study of a social world through direct experience of that world (Atkinson and Delamont, 2005) whereby the task of the researcher is to describe the 'insider' view of phenomena rather than imposing an 'outsider' view. This research adopted an Insider/ Outsider approach as the main research was undertaken by an employee of the organisation providing insights to the data of the insider with lived experience of the organisational situation. The Outsider perspective provided a more detached analytical frame to the analysis of the data (Colville, *et al.*, 2014).

While much research into workplace learning has claimed a case study design (Sawchuk, 2008), Tight (2010, p.329) argues that the term "case study" is frequently used generically: "with little or no reference to the existing social research literature on case study" and which depending upon the researchers' perspective has been applied equally to "a method, approach, style, strategy or design". He concludes that "case study as a form of social research is not a particularly meaningful term" and that the essence of many case studies is the detailed examination of a small sample of something of particular interest to the researcher, so, he asks "why don't we just call this kind of research what it is – small-

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[1] In Ellinger and Bostrom's study the terms 'coach' and 'facilitator of learning' were used synonymously by managers.

sample, in-depth study, or something like that" (Tight, 2010, p.337-338)? Therefore, this study was designed as a small-scale, in-depth study of managerial beliefs on the facilitation of learning.

This research was undertaken at Scottish Water (SW), a publicly owned company answerable to the Scottish Parliament. It is the fourth largest water and waste-water services provider in the UK. High levels of technical knowledge and expertise are relied upon to maintain levels of service and compliance against exacting regulatory standards related to drinking water quality, health and safety and environmental protection (Energy and Utility Skills, 2013).

Additionally, SW was selected as the research site as the organisation was perceived to have a strong learning orientation as indicated by awards won in the year preceding this research: the Water Industry Business Skills Awards; the CIPD Organisational Learning Award and the Utility Industry Staff Development Award.

The research approach was informed by the conceptual model of Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) of the form, direction of relationships and proposed causal connections (Blaikie, 2009, p.152) between the 'triggers', 'behaviours' and 'outcomes' occurring during the critical incidents described by line managers as 'learning episodes' for their team members (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002, p.756).

Data Selection and Sources

Participants were selected using 'judgemental' sampling of SW Business Managers from a population of c108. In seeking similarity with the selection methods used in Ellinger's (1997) research, the 'judgemental sample' was based on the identification of exemplars of the role of learning facilitator identified as being located in the upper quartile for learning and development measures in internal employee engagement surveys and through the lead researcher's tacit knowledge as a senior Learning and Development practitioner in the organisation. Eight managers were identified and subjected to in-depth qualitative interviews using critical incident technique. Permission was granted from Professor Andrea D. Ellinger to use questions created for her original research (Ellinger, 1997, p.272-276). The interview transcripts were iteratively coded using theoretical thematic analysis to describe, organise and interpret the data (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4). Initial coding used the sentence as the unit of analysis from which key themes were identified linking the units of analysis to the abstract constructs (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) of Ellinger's model. The coding process was undertaken iteratively in line with the abductive research strategy leading to a merging of the processes of data reduction and data analysis (Blaikie, 2009, p.208) until data reduction did not appear to surface themes of significance. However, given the subjectivity involved in qualitative research, including the "variability of coding" (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.259) this study was not seeking to be a replication study of Ellinger and Bostrum's (2002) original research.

Research Findings

Critical Incidents
A total of 16 critical incidents were identified as subjectively significant to the interviewee in terms of the effectiveness of the facilitation of learning (Amy, 2008) of which 14 were deemed to have been effective examples of learning interventions and two were incidents of ineffective practice. A list of the specific triggers that initiated each of the independent critical incidents is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Critical Incidents Reviewed During Research Interviews

Manager	Number of Incidents	Incident Trigger	Incident Trigger	Incident Trigger
LM1	2	A Key Person Leaving	Graduate Development	
LM2	2	An Organisational Restructure	Developing a New Team Leader	
LM3	3	A Disengaged Employee	An Unsuccessful Interview	Recruitment for a New Post
LM4	1	Succession Planning Activity		
LM5	2	Graduate Development	Formal Coaching Practice	
LM6	2	Formal Coaching Practice	An Under-Performance Issue	
LM7	2	A Conflict Situation	An Organisational Restructure	
LM8	2	An Unsuccessful Interview	An Under-Performance Issue	
Total	16			

The triggers identified align with those found in other research including delivering planned development interventions, the need to address performance issues (Ellinger and Bostrom 1999, 2002) and from organisational change (Amy 2008) and leadership development initiatives (Watkins, Lysø and deMarrais 2011). While feedback did not feature as a trigger (Mulder, 2013), this research did surface issues of recruitment and succession planning as significant triggers of critical incidents.

A total of thirteen clusters of beliefs were identified as constituent components of four thematic categories: beliefs held by managers about their roles, skills and capabilities; beliefs held by managers about learning and the learning process; beliefs held by managers about learners; and beliefs held by managers about leadership and the environment (Table 2).

Table 2: The Four Main Thematic Categories and Associated Clusters

Major Thematic Category	Clusters
Beliefs held by managers about their roles, skills and capabilities	Facilitator skills, experience and self-belief Managing skills risk & succession planning
Beliefs held by managers about learning and the learning process	Learning is social and experiential Learning delivers business results Learning is important and motivational Learning builds confidence and self-belief Learning is enabled through feedback
Beliefs held by managers about Learners	People are individuals People need to take ownership and problem solve People need help to see the bigger picture People need support to develop confidence

Manager Roles, Skills and Capabilities

Ellinger and Bostrom (2002, p.171) relate their findings to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and the "two major cognitive forces guiding human behaviour": people's beliefs about their own self-efficacy and their expectations about outcomes. Similarly, this study found that the confidence and self-efficacy articulated by managers was significant in how they approached their role as facilitators of learning. Interviewees emphasised their verbal and non-verbal communication abilities to connect cognitively and emotionally with employees to enhance employees' self-efficacy:

> Well, it was all those reassuring sounds, nonverbal communication and just nodding and saying yeah I am empathising with you. In my introduction with anyone I am saying to them this is safe, I was absolutely reassuring them I wasn't going to divulge any stuff. (LM5).

From establishing cognitive and emotional connections, managers described creating stretching activities involving complex problem-situations then pairing people together to enable shared learning or 're-shuffling' teams to create learning opportunities. Managers tended to draw on a discursive repertoire that emphasised questioning, active listening, visualisation and explanation while avoiding directive behaviours:

> You could be directive but I don't think he would've embraced it as well. It would've got done but it would've got done because it had to get done rather than opening his eyes to opportunity. You wouldn't get there; you wouldn't get the same things done. (LM4)

However, one manager did employ more directive behaviours but did not discuss this directly. Using Ryan and Bernard's (2003, p.92-93) notion of "missing data", directive behaviours were inferred from the manager not using those repertoires associated with developing employee self-efficacy through cognitive and emotional connection.

> My bias towards action drives a lot of the whole approach of 'I will fix things myself' (LM8)

The dominant discourse of other managers emphasised facilitative discussions of explaining or re-framing situations to encourage problem ownership and problem-solving. Other subtleties included the use of persuasion, negotiation and influencing to encourage people to stretch into new and unfamiliar situations. The belief that learning is a social and experiential process was referenced multiple times around the idea of exposing people to learning from others by observation and participation:

> Initially it was about being in the meetings observing others and observing styles and then just having a wee chat about it, asking how it made him feel….get to observe, interact and listen to a number of different people, look at their styles. (LM5)

The reciprocal nature of learning was referenced by all of the managers with the exception of the manager (LM8) who adopted a more directive approach in general. Other managers saw a facilitative approach to supporting learning as necessary in attaining business objectives:

> *We need to hit our own objectives, engagement is the key. I mentioned it earlier the biggest tick in the box in L&D is that it's there to facilitate your objectives – hard core and the soft side.* (LM2)

Many examples in this area were closely related to statements about creating a safe and supportive environment for learning:

> *For me it was a great development, it was a great result, we were internally promoting, we had a guy who could do the job and he had the confidence now. For me it was about saying you can do this.* (LM6)

Many managers described their motivation to make a difference to the development and progress of 'their' people. There was a clear acknowledgement of the personal benefits of a facilitative approach to supporting learning for the managers in terms of self-esteem, job satisfaction, work life balance and their personal reputation. Furthermore, five of the managers interviewed articulated a belief that the personal value they placed on learning underpinned their motivation in supporting the development of others:

> *I think I really do value L&D personally, so I like to see others get on. Some of my greatest happiness in work has come from seeing others getting promoted and move on.* (LM6)

Another manager expressed a strong gratitude for the learning opportunities he had been given that generated a deeper sense of his responsibility to enable similar opportunities for others:

> *I look at myself 20 years ago and I think of how some of the opportunities that I've had with SW have improved my self-worth and I see this in other people. I think it's hugely important.* (LM3)

Manager Beliefs about Learning

For a number of managers, feedback performed the function of supporting the growth of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1978) of the learner and to make visible the learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) to their manager:

> *I am trying to get him round to saying look you can do this, it's just another step. You are very much like me in terms of the way you handle people, so if I can do it you can do it.* (LM4)

The manager here is actively seeking to support the expansion of the learner's ZPD through stretch assignments (Zepeda, 2007, p.167), thus building the self-efficacy of the learner. LM4 articulated a motivation to create a succession plan and help his team leader progress to the next level.

The notion that learning facilitators should provide opportunities for learning while not trying to control the learner's approach to their learning (McNeil, 2001, p.249) may be challenging for managers:

> *So it was this whole learning process of it's something I don't really want to get into because I'm not confident or it's outside of my comfort zone was maybe the way it felt.* (LM7)

Empathy was understood as key to creating a safe and supportive environment for people to learn. Managers described openness, honesty and trusting relationships as important in the facilitation of learning. LM4, for example, spoke of having to work hard to 'earn' trust:

> *In terms of earning trust I've had to work very hard at times to help with issues that are important to people.* (LM4)

This emphasis on the demonstration of empathy was linked to managers' personal learning and development:

> *I've actually learned a bit about myself by looking at this, I do like to empathise, maybe not the word but I do like to understand what is making people tick, what's their drivers, what's motivating them, how do they see themselves.* (LM3)

While LM2 described removing the threat of sanctions from discussions on operational incidents as a way to facilitate trust and create a safe environment for learning:

> *Success was about positive reinforcement, not about the stick, we removed disciplinary action for utility strikes. We tried to understand what was happening and why.* (LM2)

Manager Beliefs about Leadership and the Environment
Additional insights emerged abductively from this specific research site regarding the beliefs that leaders should act as role models within the organisation and should manage skills related risk and build succession plans for the future. These insights are summarised as a category of beliefs held by managers about leadership and the environment. This category includes a distinct set of beliefs by managers' on their roles as leaders within the organisation in terms of acting as role models for the types of behaviours that they wanted to see being enacted:

> *It's really really important that managers coach their teams and it's also behavioural change and you will only get behavioural change based on the behaviours you display.* (LM4)

References to role-modelling were identified 19 times in the analysis of the interviews and were cited by seven of the eight managers who participated in the study. LM1 for example commented on observational learning:

> *These people take everything in, they are looking at how does a business manager conduct themselves, how do they react in a certain situation because they are learning all the time.* (LM1)

In extending the notion of role-modelling, managers tended to view their teams as a reflection of their leadership style. For example, LM2 identified his team's performance being a reflection of his personal performance:

> *Fundamentally the biggest satisfaction is the progressing of my own team – selfishly if they are doing well you know you are too.* (LM2)

LM4 commented on his belief in the personal legacy created by leaders in the teams that they work with and develop:

> *I remember moving on from one team and thinking I don't want to leave this team and someone saying to me "but you will build another team and it's a legacy that you will leave" and it's right enough.* (LM4)

The beliefs SW managers held about managing skills-related risks to performance and about creating succession plans for the future were also new insights. Interviewees acknowledged the need to ensure leaders had successors in development for their own roles:

> *It's that old adage about making sure there is going to be someone there to fill your shoes, because I won't be in this business for years and years to come so you need to think that if I've to get out you need to get someone in.* (LM4)

Managers were also stimulated to enhance their management of potential talent within the organisation through experience of the effects of the departure of key people through promotions or transfers. Further comments related to the need for skills development of multiple people across teams to ensure that operational performance wasn't placed at risk through reliance on one or two key people:

> *We've started to work with peer checks and there is one particular person we are struggling to replace and it worries me that if this person leaves we are left exposed. Our strategy with this is about organic growth and bringing in a few people each year to learn this and move on.* (LM6)

While, there are likely to be many reasons for these particular managerial beliefs around succession planning, key contingent factors are the dependence of SW on high levels of technical expertise along with risks associated with the prominence of any failures in the provision of the water supply.

What seemed clear in the study was that the majority of the SW managers conveyed a strong sense of ownership about the need to succession plan, manage risk and build for the future, further indicators perhaps about the managers' maturity levels in relation facilitating learning.

Discussion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings of this study reinforced many of the findings presented by Ellinger and Bostrom (2002, pp.155-168). Numerous similarities were found in the beliefs SW managers appeared to hold about their own skills, roles and capabilities and with respect to their beliefs about learners and the learning process. The managers also conveyed strong self-efficacy and outcome beliefs that align closely with the findings of Ellinger and Bostrom (2002, p.171). Figure 3 presents the managerial belief map of the inferred beliefs of the SW managers who participated in this study and acts as a frame of reference to evaluate these similarities. It is worth noting that some of the differences identified relate to the researcher's own abductive interpretation of the unique language and context of the organisation and so to the categorisation and clustering of themes resulting in the 13 clusters and four categories being identified in this analysis.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

While it is not possible to objectively quantify the relative maturity of the SW managers against the stages of the continuum, an indicative and subjective positioning by the main researcher is presented in Figure 4:

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Based on the beliefs expressed and examples provided, five of the managers moved through the intermediary steps to advanced stages of 'role adoption' and at times 'role identity' positions as facilitators of learning. A further two described approaches and mental models closer to the 'role transition' stage of the continuum as the language and expressions used represent what was still a conscious choice for the two managers rather than an unconscious component of their role. Only one SW manager expressed beliefs that align with the 'manager identity' elements of the early stages of the continuum. However, the research indicates that the majority of the SW managers were operating at more advanced positions on the scale.

The significant similarities with the findings of Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) suggest that there are a number of general beliefs that underpin the effectiveness of the line manager as a facilitator of learning. However, some new and interesting additional insights emerged abductively from this specific research site: the belief that leaders should act as role models within the organisation; and a belief in the need to manage skills related risk and build succession plans for the future. These insights underpinned the identification of an additional category to Ellinger and Bostrom's (2002) research: beliefs held by managers about leadership and the environment.

The emergence of these insights may be based on specific contingent factors given the importance for SW, as a utilities firm, on technical expertise, risk management and business continuity. Furthermore, labour market trends suggest manager, professional, specialist and technical positions are becoming increasingly difficult vacancies for organisations to fill, primarily due to technical skills shortages (CIPD, 2013b, p.5). It is suggested that these contingent business factors generate a particular sensitivity in regards to succession planning and business continuity issues for effective SW managers. Focusing on the business imperatives of risk management and securing business continuity through succession planning can identify a transition pathway for those with a strong role identity as managers to surface and value the facilitation of learning as a 'managerial' activity. So these contingent business factors may be reframed in terms of being "inherently pedagogic" (Billet, 2002, 56-61). So the inferred belief map of the SW managers (Figure 3) acts as a context specific "target of change" (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002, p.173) to be used to challenge the wider SW management population about their own beliefs relating to learning facilitation. The identification of such transition pathways requires learning and development practitioners to display the requisite 'business savvy' (CIPD, 2012) to be able to reframe internal and external environmental factors as pedagogic opportunities.

These findings bring into focus Dirkx's (1999) criticism about learners being "acted upon" and highlighting the subtle dynamics of power and control being removed from the learner

within a broader promotion of a facilitative approach to learning. Dirkx's argument surfaced in this research in terms of the range and power dynamics of relationships and interests the manager has to negotiate. How that web of relationships was negotiated depended on the manager's beliefs about people as individuals with unique approaches to problem-solving but with repeated reference to the 'bigger picture' of contingent factors needing to be addressed or taken account of.

As with any study, there were limitations to the research such as: the small number of critical incidents analysed within a single organisation; the focus on beliefs rather than behaviours; the use of a judgemental sampling seeking more learning-orientated managers and the restriction of the analysis to managers' inferred beliefs rather than their belief systems as a whole. Furthermore, the use of critical incident technique provides more information about the nature of 'atypical events' as opposed to the slower, more gradual, and tacit on-going learning in the workplace (Eraut, 2004). Thus the scope and need for further research in this area remains extensive. The research implications from this specific study are two-fold: firstly, the need for further research to validate the notion of the generic belief categories and secondly, in further in-depth studies exploring organisation-specific contingent factors in managerial beliefs.

Conclusion

This research supports the contention of both Ellinger (1997) and Amy (2008, p.227) that line managers who adopt a role of learning facilitator have a central role to play in workplace learning. Learning within the workplace is a rich, complex and non-linear web of social experience (Brown *et al*, 1989, pp.32-34; Dirkx, 1999, pp.127-128) and this research confirms that managers who act as advocates of learning are well placed to support the self-efficacy and confidence of learners as they navigate a path through these rich experiential social webs. While the research reinforced Ellinger and Bostrom's (2002) findings there were also new areas of insight that were specific to SW and that surfaced as an additional category of beliefs concerning leadership and the environment. These new findings manifested as managers' beliefs that leaders needed to act as role models within the organisation and that they needed to manage skills-related risk and build succession plans for the future. These findings are significant as they provided insight into the levels of awareness, maturity and understanding regarding the internal and external business environment among managers involved with learning processes in their particular workplace. This research surfaced specific contingent factors as the basis of potential developmental interventions to challenge managers on their beliefs relating to learning facilitation.

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