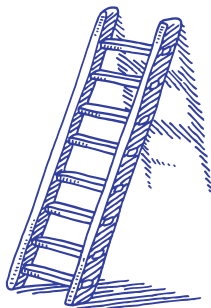




Erik de Jong

Sounds Crazy, Let's Go!



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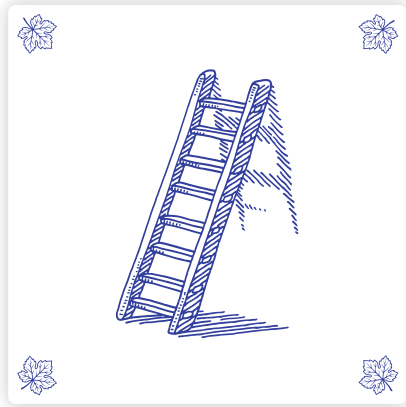
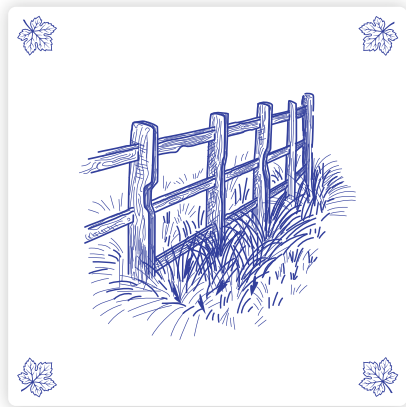
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FOREWORD BY JOOST MINNAAR

November 2025, Barcelona, 4:00 a.m.

I can't sleep. Our flight back to the Netherlands leaves in a few hours, but I'm still standing in the club (Apollo, for those who know it), close to my old student home, back from when I did my Master's in Nanotechnology in Barcelona. It feels like a previous life, but a few things are still familiar. Just like then, the techno beats are pounding through my body and I can smell beer and tequila.

Why am I telling you this? Because somewhere in the crowd in front of me, a few of the Ivy Global crew are on the dance floor, laughing, dancing, shouting over the music. Not like colleagues on a business trip, but like friends. That is the first thing that comes to mind when I think of Ivy. This doesn't feel like a company where everyone happens to work well together, it feels like a group of friends who happen to run a company.

We're in Barcelona for the second Corporate Rebels Summit, the yearly gathering of people from our Rebel Cell network, some hundred companies that believe work can be fundamentally different and can prove it. The first gathering was a year earlier in Seville, which Erik will tell you more about later in this book. By day the conversation is about self-management, ownership and the future of organisations. By night, it's about good people and a party.

I had known Ivy's founder, Jorn, for a while already. We first met a few years earlier in Veldhoven, in the shadow of ASML, at a local Rebel Cell meeting. He was there as a participant, curious, with strong opinions and with the energy of someone who isn't done with anything yet. I started following Ivy after that, and the more I saw, the more this Dutch company without a formal boss began to fascinate me.

It definitely wasn't the first self-managing company I had encountered. Since co-founding Corporate Rebels about ten years ago (not coincidentally in Barcelona and not on a beer coaster), we've visited and studied more than two hundred

similar companies. We weren't specifically looking for self-managing companies. We were looking, and still are, for companies where people enjoy going to work and are also financially successful. We learned that most of those companies practice self-management, not as a goal in itself but as a means, as an answer to the question of how you keep people engaged in what they do.

We found self-management in every shape and flavour and in every part of the world, but Ivy's story stuck with me. Unfinished as it was, I really related to this company because it dared to be so honest about itself and because, in this story, I kept seeing the three things I see in all the companies where self-management works: equality, trust and freedom.

Equality

I just described Ivy as a big group of friends but don't get me wrong, that doesn't mean everyone is equal. So what are they then? Equivalence is about treating each other as responsible adults, individuals who have their own judgment and can be held accountable for it.

That may sound obvious but it isn't. Most organisations have an inequality built in so deeply that nobody sees it anymore; the manager knows better and decides, the employees listen and execute. Ivy tries to structurally break that inequality, not by making everyone the same, but by treating everyone as equal.

Trust

The fact that Ivy is essentially a big group of friends doesn't mean there are no leaders. In fact it's the opposite, everyone can, and must, be a leader. Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow, depending on the situation and who has the most to offer at that moment; easier said than done. Following other people only works if there is trust and, as we all know, trust takes years to build and is gone in seconds.

Erik puts it well, "Self-management only works once trust in the collective outweighs the fear of not having a leader." I had to read that sentence a few times before I fully understood it; then I realised that is about as true as it gets.

Freedom

Freedom is probably the word that resonates most with people. No boss means freedom but no boss doesn't mean no structure and no agreements. Erik writes, "You can absolutely live without a boss, but not without agreements," and "Structure isn't a limitation. It's a precondition for self-management." Without structure and agreements, you don't just get freedom. You probably get chaos, informal minor bosses or simply a complete standstill.

At Ivy, they understand that all too well. They show that self-management isn't the absence of structure and process but a different kind of structure and process. Roles, frameworks, decision-making protocols, transparent salary models, this book is full of them and not without reason. Structure is necessary but self-management isn't only about having the right structures; people also need to know how to use those structures to feel free.

That is the most important lesson we learnt ourselves at Krisos, our impact fund where, alongside Corporate Rebels, we put into practice what we write and speak about. By now we've bought several small and medium-sized Spanish manufacturing companies (in Seville and Barcelona) and modified them in the direction of self-management. The biggest challenge is always the same; how do you train people to work within that freedom?

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOM

The German-American psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm described this problem back in 1941. He drew a distinction between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is the absence of control, rules, a boss watching over your shoulder. Positive freedom is the capacity to act from within yourself, to take the initiative and to feel responsibility as something that comes from inside, rather than being imposed from outside.

Creating negative freedom is what most self-managing companies do and it's not difficult. You remove the manager or you never hire one. You scrap the approval rounds and formally give people space. However, most people grow up in a world of bosses, performance reviews and dependency, so they don't turn into independent professionals who effortlessly take ownership overnight. Turning negative freedom into positive freedom takes time, attention, personal growth and a deliberate investment in the people themselves, not just in the structures around them.

Reading this book, you'll see how Ivy learned this the hard way. It is filled with a sense of frustration based on the fact that freedom can also mean confusion and that self-management doesn't automatically produce ownership. Ivy had to discover most of this for themselves. But I digress, back to the book.

INTERESTING BECAUSE IT IS UNFINISHED

While most books about self-management revolve around theory or some framework, this book is different. This book starts on a terrace with a beer coaster, a

founder for whom freedom is more important than anything else and, most important, it starts with a lot of trust. That is exactly why it's so valuable.

What Erik shows in this book is something rarely described so honestly. Self-management doesn't start with the perfect system, but with a human choice, the choice to take people seriously as thinking, responsible professionals. And making that choice, every single day, requires huge investments from the founder, the colleagues and the organisation as a whole.

The twenty experiments Erik describes are not success stories. Some experiments worked, some didn't, many were revised later and that honesty is exactly what makes this book so valuable. As Erik says, self-management isn't a final destination, it's a way of constantly being underway, falling down and getting back up.

That is what sets Ivy's story apart from many other self-managing companies; the willingness to admit you got it wrong. Most progressive companies cherish their origin story, a founder with a vision, a turning point, an organisational model that clicked into place all at once. That story is carefully maintained, because it provides identity and safety, but the downside is that it also creates a blind spot. You see things that confirm what you already believe and you see less clearly what is not working.

Ivy has that story too, the beer coaster, Ricardo Semler as inspiration, the dream of an organisation without a boss. But what this book shows and what really matters, is that Ivy has been willing, again and again, to revise that story. The shift towards more trust, more freedom and more equality isn't a passing trend, it's an answer to the way most companies organise work; an answer to a crisis of disengagement with little to no purpose. Companies that take self-management seriously, not as a marketing story but as a daily practice, are better equipped for the future.

Ivy is that kind of organisation, unfinished, underway, and precisely because of that, worth learning from. So if you're an entrepreneur who wants to know how to build an organisation without becoming the boss yourself, read this book. If you're someone who wonders whether work could be different, read it. If you're a researcher trying to understand what self-management looks like in practice, then definitely read it.

Not because Ivy is the perfect example. Perfection was never the point. The point is to start and to go on the journey.

Joost Minnaar

Co-founder, Corporate Rebels & Krisos

INTRODUCTION

Most books about business operations start with strategy, mission or a five-year plan. This story doesn't. It starts where most good ideas get born, and sometimes the worst decisions too, on a terrace, beer in hand, with a healthy dose of frustration about how the world works.

I wasn't looking for a new job. I was looking for a place where common sense has the final word, proof that things could be different, that you could build a company where common sense isn't a poster on the wall, but lives in the DNA of the organisation. I found that proof on a sunny afternoon, in 2015.

That year I got my contract (no joke) on the back of a beer coaster. I was sitting on a sunny terrace with Ivy's founder, Jorn van der Schaaf, the conversation was flowing and suddenly he pulled a beer coaster toward him. "If you want to start, we just start." He scribbled down some numbers, slid the coaster across to me and smiled like it was the most common thing in the world.

OLD JOBS, NEW IDEAS

I knew Jorn from a previous company where everything was well-organised, but still very much top-down. "Trust is good, but control is better," one of the directors liked to say. Jorn had to dress for client meetings in a three-piece suit, even though you only wear a suit at trade fairs in that industry. There he sat, perfectly suited, opposite a client in overalls with grease on his hands. The lack of trust and the top-down control were signals for Jorn to get out fast.

We kept meeting regularly, talking about our futures and about companies doing things differently; things that intrigued us but that we barely saw in practice in organisations. What would be possible if you dared to start from scratch and do it differently? Jorn told me about the company he had just started, Ivy Global, and what it could still become. It would be a way to deploy engineering students in companies, an organisation built on trust and common sense, a place that felt right or at least closer to right than anything we had experienced so far.

His plan was to place talented students from technical universities and colleges with companies. I had experimented with that myself in IT and it worked surprisingly well. Students came with fresh ideas, picked things up fast and could do far more than they thought.

He didn't want to solve that through internships. University bureaucracy made internships unnecessarily complicated or actively discouraged them, while in practice there was plenty of work students could easily handle, data structures, software testing, process analysis; work organisations never get around to, but which creates progress. Meanwhile, every year, students entered the job market without ever having set foot in a factory, a project site or attended a client meeting.

Jorn's idea was as simple as it was effective, get students working one day a week on projects, thus bringing thousands of FTEs worth of brainpower into the industry, work gets done, students are happy, companies are helped.

What struck me most was his thinking about the company itself. Jorn didn't want a traditional organisation, no managers, performance review systems or suspicion. He had been captivated by the book, *Semco Style* by Ricardo Semler, a Brazilian entrepreneur who turned his family business into a paradise of self-management, trust and common sense. From day one, Jorn dreamed of building that kind of place himself.

Besides placing students and preparing them for the working world, we had a bigger goal, the renewal of Dutch industry. And that was only possible if there was space for new ideas that wouldn't get undermined by bureaucracy and endless meetings. Self-management, we believed, was the best way to avoid that.

BUILT TO BE FREE

How Jorn started Ivy was how a free spirit builds its nest. He takes long vacations every year to distant locations, because it's in his DNA, not to impress anyone on Instagram. His parents travel the world most of the year in their own vehicle, his sister lives on Bali, his brother in Australia. Jorn grew up with little solid ground under his feet and a large dose of freedom.

He also prefers staying unattached. He would rather drive his own car than lease one, rather rent a place than buy it. He brought that same approach into his professional life but it soon clashed with traditional organisations, where fixed procedures and control tend to matter more than trust and expertise. As an em-

ployee he kept coming up against a brick wall, so he decided to build a place where he would be happy.

A BEER COASTER WITH BIG CONSEQUENCES

A few months later we had lunch together and I had just had a week full of frustration at work. Jorn asked, “Why don’t you come work with me?” I didn’t have an answer right away, just a big grin, I was excited. Two days later I quit my job, without officially saying yes to Jorn, without a contract proposal, without anything other than that dried-out beer coaster. A week and a half later I was working at Ivy.

Everything was still being built. My contract came from a beer coaster because there was no template yet, no pension plan, no office, no onboarding. My first act as an Ivy employee was driving to IKEA to buy my own desk and Jorn left for a six-week vacation three weeks after I started. “You can start during my holiday too, you know,” he had said. “What is the worst that could happen?”

In theory, quite a lot. In practice, nothing. It worked.

THE ADVENTURE OF BUILDING

We started with a small group, Jorn, Watse, Leon and me. Watse and Leon were still studying and trying to earn their degrees while building Ivy. We shared one room, threw ideas around, worked on projects and thought about how to build a company that would make us happy. We talked about books like, *Drive* by Daniel Pink and *Semco Style*. Ivy felt like an adventure book back then, still rough around the edges, but we fully believed that we were building something good.

Our culture was part student startup, part something else entirely. Nothing was organised and some things were straight-up amateurish. We just did things, although not everyone could see the potential or the bigger plan yet. Watse asked me, “Why did you quit your job to work here? This is just a small student company, right?” Despite the loose atmosphere and the chaos, it felt like something special. No roadmap, but a clear destination; it had to be different.

When I first started, I was shocked. Revenue was disappointing and I wondered if we would even make it to the end of the year. The big dreams went in the fridge for the moment. There were bills to pay and all my time went into landing clients,

which is pretty hard when there is barely any money. We worked on our own laptops, I set up multiple free accounts for software and for our house style we hired someone from Bangladesh on Fiverr for five bucks.

EVERYTHING WAS UP FOR DISCUSSION

What I loved most about that early period was how open everything was. We determined our own hours and our own holidays. Our own salaries came later because there wasn't enough structure in the beginning, and yet it worked. Everyone did what needed doing, everyone took responsibility, and if someone needed help, someone else jumped in: no procedures, no hierarchy.

That gave us space to do things differently. We only got into the world of pension plans once we decided it was time to figure it out properly. None of us knew anything about it and we were too busy with clients, projects and keeping Ivy running. Pensions felt like something for later, until we started hiring more colleagues and wanted to do right by them.

The pension plans we found were deeply frustrating, hidden costs, murky structures, complicated language and banks making everything look better than it was. We quickly realised that traditional plans aren't always in the interest of the people they're supposed to serve. Our wake-up call was when we were made to feel more like customers, than owners of our own pension plan.

We dug into it as it didn't feel right, found a more transparent alternative and ended up saving significantly on costs. That saving didn't go to the company, nor was it put by for later. That saving went straight to the colleagues; if you know better, you do better.

For me, the pension plan is a symbol of how we tried to do things at Ivy; keep thinking logically, and don't be afraid to try something new. It wasn't just a practical decision, it was also a confirmation of how we wanted to work together, making deliberate choices instead of automatic ones.

THE MAGIC OF THE BEGINNING

Looking back at those first months, it feels like we were in a parallel universe where everything was possible, everything was still wide open and, "why shouldn't this work?" got asked more often than, "how is it supposed to be done?" It was a rare

combination of naivety, curiosity and trust, a combination that turned out to be worth its weight in gold.

What helped in our decision making was knowing where we wanted to go. Everything had to be different and if something felt traditional, we kept looking for a fresher, more human or smarter way of working, because we believed it could be better.

So we dreamed of a company that would become an experiment factory, an environment where you're allowed to try, stumble and keep going. A company full of experiments, without red tape and bureaucracy.



We quickly decided for self-management as our organising principle. If you want people to take the initiative, you can't keep working with permission and control; freedom has to be the starting point. Self-management became our means and, eventually, our biggest experiment.

FREEDOM BEHIND THE WHEEL

My first real sense of why freedom at work matters came from a truck driver. When I was fifteen, I worked at a distribution centre and regularly travelled with Harold. He had a bad back but a truck driver's license, so he drove and I did the heavy lifting. Harold talked a lot, mostly things a fifteen-year old shouldn't hear. I was fascinated and one thing he said has always stuck with me, "This is my dream job. No boss watching over your shoulder all day."

I just saw hard work and long days for low pay. At fifteen, I had no idea what I wanted to become. The dream of becoming a footballer was already dead, but I did want to get rich. How could this be a dream job? Harold's insight got me thinking. Is freedom more important than money?

Later, as a manager, limiting other people's freedom felt unnatural too. Rating people with letters and numbers started to feel uncomfortable and so did faithfully following rules I hadn't imposed myself. Not that they were necessarily bad rules, a lot of them made sense in theory, but the problem is that rules and procedures aren't relevant to every situation. Often the rule worked against the very

goal it was meant to serve and that was what frustrated my team. “This rule is not serving me, it makes no sense. Make an exception, now!”

And yet I stuck to those rules, because I felt responsible for enforcing them, even when my gut feeling had long since told me something was off. That diminishes the connection you’ve carefully built with your colleagues. They stopped arguing with me and started arguing with my alter ego, the one who put rules above their interests. For me too, the top-down control began to feel increasingly forced and I felt trapped in a web of rules and structures.

Then came Ivy. Jorn’s happiest working years had been as a freelancer, without meeting structures and power games. He had space to design how he worked, to decide where to put his energy and how to approach things without constantly having to consult or ask permission. That gave him peace and energy. He could experiment, learn from his mistakes and grow in a way that suited him.

Jorn wanted to build an organisation around the idea that professionals do their best work when they’re set free, an organisation where you get space to do what you’re good at and put your own stamp on it. He wanted to translate his own experience into a company that made freedom structurally possible.

Jorn believes that if you take people seriously, if you trust them, they’re perfectly capable of making good decisions and they can guard the company’s interests just as well as a manager, maybe better. That conviction ran deep, because with previous employers we had seen how different rules applied to different people, freedom at the top, control for everyone else and we didn’t want that inequality anymore; everyone had to get the same space.

When I celebrated my five-year anniversary at a previous work place, the director gave a little speech. “Erik is a bit of an odd one out,” he said with a grin, “he always trusts people.” It was probably meant as a compliment, but it struck me as strange because I had always thought that trusting people was normal. Apparently, it was not so and maybe that was the seed, the moment when I thought, it should be different.

TRUST GIVEN, BUT NOT HEARD

Harold wasn’t just someone who loved his freedom; he was also a keen thinker. He knew exactly what wasn’t working, which procedures failed, which forms were pointless and how things could be better. He was often right but his bosses didn’t

listen, too busy with other things. They felt that Harold should stop complaining, so nothing changed and I found that incredibly frustrating. You have someone in your organisation who sees exactly where things are going wrong, but if nobody listens, everything stays the same. That is also where my feeling comes from that things need to fundamentally change. That strict control, combined with “keep your mouth shut”, gets you nowhere.

Harold kept his insights to himself and bottled up his frustration. His manager then saw him, not just as critical but as *bitterly* critical, which made Harold even angrier. (Do you see the downward spiral?)

This dynamic also says something about the quality of the decisions being made. Management decides, but they’re rarely working in the day-to-day operation and only see part of what is happening. Let’s say they know about half the problems, while the people on the floor experience eighty per cent of reality. Yet they’re not the ones deciding. That power sits with managers making decisions based on incomplete information.

That doesn’t just create misunderstandings, it creates missed opportunities too. Colleagues don’t feel taken seriously and lose their motivation to suggest improving ideas. “Why would I even say anything, they won’t listen anyway.” A gap opens up between thinking and doing, between policy and practice and that gap grows as organisations grow. More management layers, more meeting structures, more approval rounds, all meant to improve the quality of decisions, often with the opposite effect.

At Ivy we wanted the people actually doing the work to have influence over the decisions that affect them, because that leads to better decisions. It sounds logical and it is logical, but in most organisations this way of working is still surprisingly rare.

AUTONOMY AS A MORAL COMPASS

This is about more than a different way of working, it is about a different world-view. We believe people aren’t motivated by targets or spreadsheets. They’ll naturally start contributing once you take them seriously because the work matters and it feels like their company. In his book, *Drive*, Daniel Pink confirmed what already felt intuitively right to us, that people are most motivated by autonomy, mastery and purpose, rather than spreadsheets and bonuses. They are motivated by the opportunity to become good at something, to decide how they work and to believe that their work matters.

A good example, Pink points out, is the difference between Encarta and Wikipedia. In the early nineties, Microsoft paid countless experts to build a digital encyclopaedia that folded ten years later. Wikipedia was built in 2001 by volunteers, out of the pure motivation to share knowledge and is still going.

Or the Wright Brothers, Orville and Wilbur, in the early twentieth century, caught up in a sensational race against Samuel Pierpont Langley to be first to conquer the sky. Langley was the clear favourite. He was secretary of the renowned Smithsonian Institution and had a government subsidy of fifty thousand dollars, a huge sum in those days. But where Langley was driven mainly by the external promise of fame and fortune, the Wrights had nothing but their own bicycle shop and boundless craftsmanship. Precisely because they were propelled by an “inner fire”, rather than external incentives, they kept going where the bureaucratic establishment failed. While Langley quit the moment his machine crashed publicly into a river, the Wrights saw every crash as a chance to learn. That was how two ordinary bicycle makers became the first to conquer gravity.

THE WAR FOR TALENT

At Ivy, we can see that the current generation of students, Generation Z, is looking for fundamentally different things from their work. They don’t want a job ladder or checkboxes, they want purpose, transparency, autonomy. They also want influence, continuous development and to be themselves. They won’t tolerate a system where they just execute what someone above them comes up with; they want to be taken seriously and rightly so.

We wanted to connect with that. The war for talent isn’t a buzzword, it’s the hard reality for organisations everywhere. Competition for highly educated young professionals is brutal and that means that talent has options. Companies clinging to traditional structures are losing ground, because the next generation is quick with their feedback. If it doesn’t feel right, they’re gone.

Organisations that don’t take this seriously are being overtaken by companies that do invest in trust, autonomy and meaningful work, by companies that don’t see young people as replaceable parts but as full colleagues. This was never just about what we, as an organisation, wanted. The world is changing and so are the people in it. We wanted to build an organisation that fits this moment.

We had plenty of dreams and plenty of ideas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erik de Jong worked in secondment and at a digital marketing agency before joining Ivy Global in 2015, after owner Jorn van der Schaaf offered him an employment contract on a beer coaster that he couldn't say no to. Since then, he has started and guided dozens of experiments at Ivy. What that involves is hard to sum up in one sentence. It took him years to figure that out himself.

Erik studied Industrial Engineering and Management, found inspiration in thinkers like Ricardo Semler and Daniel Pink and discovered along the way that reading about self-management is a lot easier than putting it into practice.

Outside Ivy, Erik is married to Susan and father of Tijn and Sieb. He loves photography, exercising, and enjoys zombie movies, mostly because he is curious about how a collapsed world starts rebuilding itself and how people organise themselves once every structure falls away. Not all that different, really, from what he does at Ivy; just with fewer zombies.

The Brutally Honest Story of 10 Years Experimenting with Freedom, Equality, and Self-Management

More than ten years ago, Jörn van der Schaaf had two ideas: wouldn't it be a good idea to engage technical students to develop innovative solutions for companies and wouldn't it make sense if the organization itself worked in an innovative, self-managing and experimental manner? The answer to those ideas became Ivy Global. Ivy has since grown to become a company of over 150 employees, winning several awards as one of the fastest growing organizations in the Netherlands.

Erik de Jong joined the company very early on and in his book, *Sounds Crazy, Let's Go!* he describes a journey of experimentation with methods of self-management, decision-making, transparency, feedback, strategy, long-term goals, growth and profit sharing. Today, Ivy is an organization where employees can determine their own working hours, vacation days, salary and where the CEO is able to take a year-long sabbatical, knowing he leaves the company in good hands.

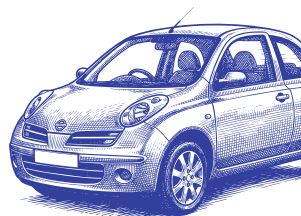
This is the book that Ivy could have used at the start, but the experiences, insights and personal reflections are now available for managers, entrepreneurs and companies that want to experiment with their salary model and self-management.

"The book's strength lies, not in selling a perfect model but in its candor about what worked, what failed and what had to be let go. Insightful, practical and often funny, it gives others the courage to try new ideas and ask—and to keep asking—what organizational freedom is for and what it demands of us. Sounds mad? Perhaps, but certainly worth reading!" – Otti Vogt, Co-Founder Global Society for Good Leadership

"Erik reveals something that is rarely described with such honesty; that self-management doesn't start by developing a perfect system but with the decision to focus on the people." – Joost Minnaar, Corporate Rebels

"An organization is never finished, which is a good thing! That is why experimenting is the best thing an organization can do."

– Luuk Willems, Co-founder Semco Style Institute



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