Chapter 1

Autocratic Leadership ∂

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the theoretical framework of autocratic leadership with a multidimensional approach and to examine the effects of this leadership style at the organizational and individual levels, its principles, dimensions, and its relationship with the cultural context. In the leadership literature, autocratic leadership is defined as a managerial approach that focuses on absolute authority in decision-making processes, limits the participation of subordinates, and prioritizes control mechanisms. While this leadership model can be functional in terms of rapid intervention and maintaining order, especially in crisis conditions, it can weaken organizational flexibility, employee loyalty, and psychological safety in the long run. In the study, autocratic leadership was analyzed through five basic dimensions, and significant structural patterns were revealed in areas such as decision-making style, use of authority, communication style, level of supervision, and leader-subordinate relations. In addition, the study draws attention to the role of cultural factors in shaping the leadership approach and emphasizes that high power distance and collectivist cultures are more prone to an autocratic approach.

1. Introduction

Leadership plays a decisive and crucial role in the sustainability and effectiveness of modern organizations. Accordingly, the impact of leadership styles on organizational structures, employee behaviors, and performance indicators has become one of the main areas of discussion in management sciences. Among these styles, autocratic leadership represents a management model in which authority is centralized and decision-making processes are based on the initiative of the leader within a hierarchical structure. Autocratic leaders make decisions without the participation of subordinates, directly control organizational processes, and demand strict adherence to

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rules (Molemane et al., 2015). Historically, this approach has been widely adopted, especially in military organizations, crisis management situations, or sectors with a high need for control.

Although autocratic leadership is traditionally considered to be oppressive and counterproductive to employee motivation, a more comprehensive and multidimensional assessment is needed to understand all aspects of this approach. Some studies in the literature suggest that autocratic leadership in certain contexts may provide advantages in terms of organizational efficiency, speed of decision-making and crisis management (Yea et al., 2024; Asno & Sary, 2023), and that autocratic leadership style may have the potential to create positive and significant effects on employee performance, especially under conditions of crisis and high levels of uncertainty (Asno & Sary, 2023).

On the other hand, this leadership style can often bring risks such as decreased employee satisfaction, suppression of innovative thinking, weakened organizational commitment, and increased deviant behavior (Khizer et al., 2024; Liaqat et al., 2024). International studies show that employees show lower levels of motivation and job satisfaction under authoritarian management.

In this chapter, the concept of autocratic leadership will be discussed in a holistic framework, and its reflections at both organizational and individual levels will be examined. In addition, the principles and dimensions of leadership, the main areas of debate in the literature, and the legitimacy of autocratic leadership in the contemporary context will be questioned. The subject will be evaluated not only as a theoretical discussion but also in the light of applied results and sectoral comparisons. Thus, it is aimed to provide the reader with an in-depth and critical perspective on the place of autocratic leadership in contemporary management practices.

2. Overview of Autocratic Leadership

Leadership is considered a basic managerial function that determines the direction of organizations, plays a decisive role in making strategic decisions, and directs employee behavior. In this context, among different leadership styles, one of the approaches that has been focused on and attracted significant attention in the literature has been the autocratic leadership style. In this leadership style, decision-making authority is generally concentrated in a single individual, the leader, and the participation of employees in the process is minimized or completely excluded. The leader's decisions are

implemented without question, and communication within the organization is vertical and unidirectional (Yea et al., 2024).

When the historical origins of this leadership style are analyzed, it is seen that it is defined within the framework of "rational-legal authority" within the Weberian typology of authority. According to Weber, in structures where leadership power is based on legal norms and authority is strictly enforced from top to bottom, it is accepted that the autocratic form of government has institutional legitimacy. For this reason, autocratic leadership has been positioned as a frequently preferred management style, especially in the standardization of production lines after the industrial revolution, military structures that require discipline, and crisis periods (Maseti & Gumede, 2011; Altintas, 2024).

In today's management literature, the functionality of autocratic leadership is addressed from a more critical perspective. It is stated that in processes carried out under the absolute authority of the leader, negative results such as decreased motivation levels of employees, decreased organizational commitment, and suppression of creativity are frequently observed (Liaqat et al., 2024; Khizer et al., 2024). However, it is also emphasized in the literature that this leadership style contributes to accelerating decision-making processes in situations such as time pressure, high risk level, or organizational chaos (Hamze & Sadiq, 2025; Asno & Sary, 2023).

The functionality of leadership styles is not only related to their conceptual characteristics but also to the cultural, sectoral, and structural contexts in which they are applied. Indeed, autocratic leadership has been found to be legitimate in some cultural structures, and this style is met with less resistance by employees. It is stated that in societies where respect for authority is high, this leadership style is more easily internalized, whereas in structures with high levels of individualism, conflict and resistance levels increase. This situation indicates that leadership styles should be considered within the framework of contextual validity rather than universal validity (Modise, 2024; Kanat & Geçgin, 2025).

On the other hand, it is also argued that autocratic leadership provides speed and clarity in decision-making processes due to its "one-voice" structure and offers certain advantages in achieving organizational goals without deviation. However, it is argued that these advantages are generally short-term; in the long run, they may lead to employee disengagement, low job satisfaction, and weakening of innovative capacity (Jony et al, 2019).

Based on this framework, autocratic leadership is neither a completely functional nor a completely objectionable management model. On the contrary, the advantages and disadvantages of this leadership style should be analyzed by taking into account multidimensional factors such as the personality traits of the leader, organizational culture, structural needs, and external environmental conditions. Therefore, in evaluating the effects of autocratic leadership, unidirectional interpretations should be avoided, and a multidimensional, contextual, and critical perspective should be adopted.

3. Autocratic Leadership at The Organizational Level

Within organizational structures, leadership styles are among the main managerial factors that shape decision-making processes, communication styles, employee performance, and the overall organizational climate. Autocratic leadership stands out as a management style in which hierarchical control and authority are felt intensely in organizations. In this leadership style, the leader's decisions are implemented directly and often without consultation, and organizational members are generally positioned as passive actors who carry out instructions (Yea et al., 2024). At the organizational level, autocratic leadership is often associated with centralized decision-making structures, in which functions such as strategic planning, performance management, crisis intervention, and resource allocation are centralized to achieve efficiency (Korkmaz & Altintas, 2024; Elkırmış & Yılmaz, 2024). In this respect, autocratic leadership is adopted as a preferred form of leadership, especially in organizational environments where time pressure is high, rapid action is required, or crisis situations are in question (Asno & Sary, 2023). However, various studies have also shown that this leadership model may lead to negative outcomes in dimensions such as organizational commitment, motivation, and employee engagement. Empirical studies, especially in educational institutions and the service sector, have found that autocratic leadership increases distrust among employees, weakens organizational synergy, and suppresses innovative suggestions (Liaqat et al., 2024; Bhatti et al., 2012).

The effects of autocratic leadership at the organizational level are directly related to the behavioral style of the leader, and this relationship may vary according to organizational culture, sectoral structure, and employee profile. As a matter of fact, a study conducted in higher education institutions in 2023 revealed that employee engagement can be strengthened when autocratic leadership is applied in a certain dose. However, it was stated that this commitment was mostly achieved through control mechanisms based

on discipline and punishment, and therefore, it was not sustainable (Yea et al., 2024).

However, it is also suggested that autocratic leadership can increase organizational symmetry and contribute to the maintenance of internal order. In a 2019 study conducted in Iraq on education directorate employees, it was found that the "benevolent autocratic leadership" approach increased the sense of organizational belonging and supported organizational symmetry (Abdullah et al., 2019). These findings suggest that there are significant differences between cases where autocratic leadership is practiced in a rigid manner and cases where it is adopted in a "softened" manner.

Autocratic leadership at the organizational level also affects internal innovation processes. In environments where this form of leadership is practiced, the fact that decision-making processes are closed to employees makes it difficult for innovative ideas to emerge and be supported; this situation negatively affects the competitiveness of organizations in the long term (Wagner, 1995). Therefore, the functionality of autocratic leadership is limited, especially in knowledge-based sectors and in areas that require high levels of creativity.

To summarize the organizational effects of autocratic leadership listed above;

Acceleration of Decision-Making Processes: As the leader holds all the authority, fast and clear decisions can be made in emergency situations. This feature strengthens organizational reflexes, especially in times of crisis (Asno & Sary, 2023).

Strengthening Organizational Symmetry and Hierarchy: The reinforcement of hierarchical structures allows roles and tasks to be clearly defined, which contributes to maintaining internal order (Abdullah et al., 2019).

Decreased Employee Participation: Limited opportunity to participate in decisions leads to alienation of employees from the processes, which negatively affects organizational commitment (Yea et al., 2024).

Suppression of Innovation and Creativity: The narrowing of the space for employees to present ideas makes it difficult to generate innovative solutions, which reduces competitiveness, especially in knowledge-based industries (Wagner, 1995)

Decline in Motivation and Job Satisfaction: Limiting participation and authoritarian control mechanisms reduce the intrinsic motivation of employees, which in turn reduces job satisfaction (Liaqat et al., 2024).

Weakening of Organizational Commitment: In organizations where rigid management structures are dominant, employees have difficulty in identifying themselves with the organization and cannot develop long-term commitment (Bhatti et al., 2012).

Internal Audit and Increased Discipline: In structures where autocratic leadership is dominant, internal control mechanisms are strengthened and strict discipline is maintained within the organization. This may lead to short-term performance gains (Modise, 2024).

As can be seen in the literature, autocratic leadership is considered a form of management that can produce functional results under certain conditions in terms of organizational aspects, but poses risks in terms of long-term performance, commitment, and innovation. Therefore, the applicability of autocratic leadership needs to be analyzed by considering the structural needs, cultural codes, and sectoral dynamics of the organization.

4. Autocratic Leadership at the Individual Level

The effects of autocratic leadership style at the individual level directly shape employees' basic work experiences, such as motivation, psychological well-being, organizational commitment, and professional satisfaction. In this leadership model, limiting the employee's participation in decision-making processes, ignoring their opinions and suggestions, and subjecting them to a control-oriented managerial approach increases the psychosocial pressure on the individual. Therefore, it has decisive consequences on individuals' attitudes towards their work, their professional productivity, and their sense of belonging to the organization (Yarar & Babaoğlan, 2025).

In many studies, it has been reported that employees exposed to autocratic leadership have a particularly low level of psychological safety perception, are hesitant to communicate openly with the leader, and are pushed into a suppressed role within the organization (Yea et al., 2024). This situation has been found to decrease the intrinsic motivation of individuals and lead to a decrease in job satisfaction in the long run (Liaqat et al., 2024). In addition, autocratic leadership is considered a suppressive factor for individuals' organizational citizenship behaviors (such as self-sacrifice, benevolence, volunteerism, etc.). This is because individuals may refrain from taking responsibility and contributing to organizational development in an environment where their opinions are not valued. In a study conducted

in 2024, it was observed that the autocratic leadership style weakens the perception of organizational justice at the individual level and, as a result, deviant behaviors (destructive and against the rules) increase (Khizer et al., 2024).

Despite the negative effects at the individual level, autocratic leadership has also been shown to provide short-term benefits in some specific circumstances. Indeed, when inexperienced employees are removed from complex decision-making processes, they may understand their tasks more clearly and become more receptive to guidance. Moreover, in highly disciplined environments, task-oriented performance may increase, especially in the early stages (Shrestha et al., 2024). However, this effect is usually temporary and may evolve into irreversible negative consequences if individual development and initiative are suppressed. It has also been stated in various studies that individuals working under autocracy have an increased risk of experiencing burnout syndrome in the long term, their tendency to quit their jobs increases, and their overall job performance decreases (Bhatti et al., 2012; Geçgin & Gülsoy, 2024). Especially in structures where the leader exhibits punitive or oppressive attitudes, the psychological resilience of employees weakens, and the sense of belonging decreases significantly.

To summarize the individual effects of autocratic leadership listed above;

Clarification of Job Description: The leader's directive and instruction-oriented attitude contributes to a clearer understanding of what needs to be done, especially for new or inexperienced employees (Shrestha et al., 2024).

Protection from Complex Decisions: The cognitive load of individuals who are excluded from difficult decision-making processes is reduced; this may provide a relaxing work experience for some employees.

Discipline and Short-Term Performance Improvement: Individuals working under a strict leadership structure may be more likely to fulfill certain tasks on time and completely. This can lead to productivity, especially in result-oriented jobs.

Weakening of Psychological Safety: Employees' courage to communicate and share ideas with the leader decreases; this situation creates a feeling of suppression (Yea et al., 2024).

Deviant Behavior Tendency: Factors such as perceived injustice, control pressure, and lack of expression can lead to negative and organizationally damaging behaviors (Khizer et al., 2024).

Suppression of Innovation and Creativity: Autocratic leadership prevents the emergence of creative potential as it weakens the individual's courage to think critically and propose innovations. This situation negatively affects individual development and organizational competitiveness, especially in knowledge-based and innovation-based sectors (Wagner, 1995).

Based on the framework outlined above, it is seen that autocratic leadership deeply affects the attitudes, psychological states, and behavioral tendencies of employees regarding their organizational life. The effects of this form of leadership on the individual should be evaluated not only with the level of managerial pressure, but also with multidimensional variables such as the employee's personality traits, level of experience, nature of the job, and organizational culture.

5. Principles and Dimensions of Autocratic Leadership

The structural character of autocratic leadership is determined not only by the way the leader makes decisions, but also by the set of principles that make this approach a managerial practice and the behavioral dimensions that become visible within the organization. This model, which is based on the absolute authority of the leader, is constructed and put into practice in a certain systematic order at every stage of managerial functioning. In this context, not only "what autocratic leadership does" but also "how it does it" gains importance. Therefore, the basic normative principles on which autocratic leadership is based and how these principles are reflected in organizational behaviors should be addressed. In addition, the functional structure of autocratic leadership needs to be comprehensively analyzed not only through its consequences but also through its constituent elements (Elkırmış, 2024). Accordingly, both the normative principles and the behavioral dimensions of autocratic leadership observed at the implementation level are discussed in detail below.

5.1. Basic Principles of Autocratic Leadership

Absolute centralization of authority: In autocratic leadership, decision-making authority is concentrated in a single leader figure; the leader makes all strategic and operational decisions on his/her individual initiative. This centralization of authority leads to a management culture based on authority throughout the organization (Yea et al., 2024).

Structural Limitation of Subordinate Participation: Employees are not included in decision-making processes; their opportunities to offer suggestions, criticism, or alternative views are largely blocked. Thus,

subordinates are positioned in a passive position in line with the unquestioned orders of the leader (Maseti & Gumede, 2011).

Prioritization of Discipline and Control: In autocratic leadership structures, strict compliance with rules and tightening control mechanisms are adopted as a basic norm. The leader keeps the activities of employees under constant surveillance and punishes deviant behaviors (Khizer et al., 2024).

Results Orientation and Performance Pressure: In this leadership model, which focuses on results rather than processes, employees are only expected to fulfill their assigned tasks on time and completely. This approach may encourage productivity in the short term but may hinder long-term development, learning, and adaptation processes (Asno & Sary, 2023).

One-way and top-down communication: In autocratic leadership, the flow of communication is usually top-down and one-way. The leader gives information and instructions directly; feedback from subordinates is either limited or completely blocked. This structure does not allow for two-way communication and open dialogue (Modise, 2024).

5.2. Dimensions of Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership is not only based on certain managerial principles but is also shaped by behavioral and structural dimensions that show how these principles operate in organizational practice. These dimensions concretely reveal how leaders use authority, how they relate to employees, and how they maintain management. These dimensions, which are generally examined under five main headings in the literature, are decision-making, use of authority, communication style, control mechanisms, and leader-subordinate relations. These dimensions, which are very important for understanding the appearance of autocratic leadership in practice and its impact on employees, can be defined as follows (Liaqat et al., 2024).

Decision-Making Dimension: In autocratic leadership, the decision-making process is under the absolute control of the leader. Strategic, managerial, or day-to-day decisions are made directly by the leader, without any consultation or collective wisdom process. Employees are seen as responsible for the implementation of decisions; they are not encouraged to contribute or be involved in the process. While this structure facilitates quick and clear decisions, especially under time pressures, it has the effect of limiting organizational capacity for learning, diversity, and adaptation.

Use of Authority and Power Dimension: This dimension determines how the leader uses his/her authority and how he/she is positioned within the organization. The autocratic leader uses formal authority not only as a positional tool but also as a power of direct intervention and direction. There is no delegation of authority; the entire chain of control, orders, and instructions is leader-centered. This situation strengthens the unquestionable position of the leader while restricting the employees' space for independent thinking, decision-making, and responsibility development. Thus, the balance of power within the organization turns into a single-centered, top-down hierarchy.

Communication Dimension: In autocratic leadership, communication is basically a one-way transmission from top to bottom. The leader only communicates tasks, orders, and expectations to subordinates, whereas processes such as receiving feedback from subordinates, exchanging ideas, or developing mutual understanding are either not carried out at all or remain at a symbolic level. This structure ensures that the flow of information is under the absolute control of the leader but seriously undermines organizational transparency, mutual trust, and open communication.

Supervision and Monitoring Dimension: This dimension is related to the leader's constant observation of employee behavior and close monitoring of performance. The disciplinary approach is strict; tolerance for rule violations is low, and punishment mechanisms are prominent. Although this strict control system is effective in preventing deviations and achieving short-term goals, it creates pressure on employees and reduces their sense of psychological security. Constant monitoring often leads to individual consequences such as stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction.

Leader-Subordinate Relations Dimension: The relationship between leaders and employees is largely task-based and hierarchical. Human bonds such as emotional closeness, mutual trust, or democratic interaction are weak; the leader is positioned as a figure who keeps his distance and constantly reminds his authority over subordinates. This type of relationship prevents employees from feeling valued, identifying with the organization, and showing initiative. This structure, in which subordinates are kept only in the role of implementers, negatively affects belonging, commitment, and voluntary contribution behaviors in the long run.

6. The Role of Autocratic Leadership in the Future

For many years, autocratic leadership has been considered a functional tool within governance structures based on centralized authority and has

been a preferred leadership style, especially in time-pressured conditions where decisions need to be made quickly. However, with the transformation of contemporary management paradigms along the axis of democratization, participation, and inclusiveness, the legitimacy of this leadership approach has been questioned more and more. At this point, the question of what role autocratic leadership will play in the future has come to the fore again, especially in the context of crisis management practices and organizational resilience debates.

Crisis situations (natural disasters, pandemics, wars, economic collapses, etc.) require rapid and centralized organization of decision-making processes, and, therefore, an autocratic leadership style stands out as an effective tool in this context. In times of crisis, when individuals' power to cope with uncertainty decreases, social acceptance of strong and directive leader figures increases, and authority becomes a symbol of security and order (Shrestha et al., 2024). In such situations, autocratic leadership can facilitate the rapid reorganization of disorganized structures, the clear distribution of tasks, and the strengthening of coordination. However, this temporary functionality often risks becoming intertwined with toxic governance practices.

The unquestioning internalization of authority becomes permanent after the crisis, and as the leader's sphere of control expands, employee participation, the right to question, and freedom of expression are pushed to the background (Khizer et al., 2024). Thus, even after the crisis passes, authoritarian structures are institutionalized and democratic governance is replaced by permanent mechanisms of repression. Moreover, in the new business world, where digitalization, generational change, and horizontal organizational tendencies are becoming more prevalent, the structural incompatibilities of autocratic leadership are becoming more apparent. In this age of democratized access to information and employees demanding more voice and responsibility, oppressive and monocentric forms of leadership pose serious risks to organizational commitment, innovation, and psychological well-being (Liaqat et al., 2024).

For these reasons, the role of autocratic leadership in the future will be determined by the answer to the question of whether it will be a temporary crisis management tool or a systemic governance issue. If this style of leadership is applied only in emergency situations, for a limited period of time, and within accountable structures, it can be effective. However, when it becomes permanent and is removed from democratic control, it risks becoming a toxic form of governance that suppresses employee psychology, organizational climate, and ethical values, along with managerial authority.

7. Autocratic Leadership and Culture

Leadership is not only a set of managerial behaviors, but also a reflection of the values, norms, and expectations of social culture on management processes. From this perspective, autocratic leadership can be considered as an institutionalized outcome of certain cultural codes and historical governance habits rather than the preference of a particular leader. In particular, issues such as how power is distributed in organizations, how authority is legitimized, and to what extent employees are involved in managerial decisions are largely shaped by the cultural framework (Muk & İnandı, 2025).

Autocratic leadership is considered a more "legitimate" and even "natural" form of leadership in cultures where high power distance norms are dominant. Conceptually, power distance refers to the extent to which society embraces hierarchical distinctions between authority figures and subordinates. For example, in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and some African countries, the fact that the manager is an unquestionable authority figure is not only an institutional requirement but also a culturally internalized expectation. In this context, the autocratic leader is accepted not only as a distributor of tasks but also as an unquestionable guide where decisions are taken from a single center (Yarar & Babaoğlan, 2025).

Real-life examples show that in centralized cultures such as China, leaders are more likely to succeed with structures that give direct orders, impose strict rules, and are closed to employee participation. This suggests that leadership styles that are compatible with cultural norms can increase organizational effectiveness. However, in societies accustomed to individualistic and horizontal relationships (e.g., Sweden, Canada, or the Netherlands), the same authoritarian approaches lead to management crises, declines in employee satisfaction, and significant increases in high turnover rates (Imtiaz, 2025).

In particular, global companies or multinational organizations are experiencing how autocratic approaches that do not take into account the leadership expectations of different cultures can lead to problematic results. In fact, scenarios such as a Western leader having difficulty in establishing authority over a team in the Middle East with a democratic leadership style or, conversely, an Eastern manager being alienated in the West due to his or her autocratic behavior are typical examples of cultural leadership mismatch.

Cultural context also transforms the way autocratic leadership is perceived. A figure seen as a "decisive and visionary leader" in one society may be

labeled as an "oppressive and authoritarian manager" in another (Van de Vliert, 2006). Therefore, when evaluating autocratic leadership practices, it is necessary to pay attention not only to the behaviors of the leader but also to the cultural structure in which these behaviors are embedded.

In line with this framework, it should be stated that autocratic leadership is not a model that can be declared universally effective or unsuccessful; it can have positive effects on organizations when it is compatible with cultural values, while it can have destructive consequences on employee engagement, psychological safety, and managerial legitimacy when this harmony is not realized. Therefore, it should be emphasized that leadership should not only be limited to "what to do" but also be considered as a comprehensive activity that requires knowing "where to do it and to whom to do it".

8. Conclusion

Based on the academic literature, this study reveals that autocratic leadership is not only a managerial preference or individual tendency, but also a multi-layered form of leadership that is interwoven with organizational dynamics, social culture, and historical processes. Autocratic leadership functions as a kind of managerial "safety valve," especially in structures where decision-making processes are centralized and control and hierarchy are at the forefront. In this context, the management style shaped under the absolute authority of the leader may provide effectiveness and efficiency under certain conditions, but it also brings with it significant behavioral, psychological, and structural risks.

Academic research at the organizational level has shown that autocratic leadership can be effective in achieving short-term goals quickly, clarifying job descriptions, and maintaining order in times of crisis. However, it is also emphasized that this effectiveness can have a limiting effect on critical factors such as organizational flexibility, innovation capacity, and employee commitment in the long run. This reveals that leadership is not only a process of "managing" but also a process of 'developing' and "empowering".

At the individual level, the most emphasized effects of autocratic leadership are evident in employee motivation, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being. The state of constant control and supervision over employees weakens individual initiative, leading to silence, withdrawal, withdrawal from creative contribution, and even burnout. For this reason, the perceptual effects of power on employees should be carefully managed, as well as the way the leader uses power.

The dimensions discussed in this study reveal the multifaceted nature of autocratic leadership and the fact that leadership is not only a behavioral but also a structural phenomenon. This type of leadership, which is analyzed at many levels from decision-making to communication style, from the use of power to leader-subordinate relations, assumes different functions in different contexts. Especially the cultural context stands out as a determinant variable in terms of the legitimacy and sustainability of this leadership style. In collectivist cultures with high power distance, autocratic leadership is accepted at a normative level, whereas in cultures with individualism and low power distance, this type of leadership is perceived as problematic and conflictual. This situation reveals that leadership should be designed with context-sensitive approaches rather than universal principles.

In the implications for the future, autocratic leadership is expected to become an increasingly less preferred model unless it is aligned with the transforming parameters of the business world, such as digitalization, horizontal organization, psychological safety, and generational differences. This transformation moves leadership away from establishing authority to creating meaning and value, creating shared vision, and developing an inclusive governance approach.

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