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Original Article

Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory: A Cognitive–Systemic Model for Decision-Making Under High Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT: *This article introduces Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory (NLT), a new theoretical framework integrating neuroscience, complexity science, and leadership studies to explain how strategic decision-making functions under conditions of volatility, uncertainty, and system instability. Moving beyond psychological trait accounts, NLT conceptualises leadership as an emergent cognitive–systemic process grounded in neural network dynamics and nonlinear organisational feedback loops. Drawing from predictive processing, large-scale brain network theory, and adaptive systems science, NLT argues that decision quality emerges through the co-evolution of neural plasticity, uncertainty management, affective regulation, and contextual entropy absorption. The theory challenges traditional perspectives that view leadership attributes as stable traits or rational cognitive choices, proposing instead that effective leadership arises from the dynamic integration of cognitive networks capable of reorganising information under stress and unpredictability. The article synthesises empirical evidence from cognitive neuroscience, organisational studies, and social complexity to formalise a conceptual apparatus capable of explaining why some leaders thrive under uncertainty while others collapse. It concludes by outlining the scientific implications of neurocomplexity for education, leadership development, and institutional design.*

KEYWORDS: *Neurocomplexity, Leadership theory, Brain networks, Uncertainty, Complexity science, Cognition, Entropy.*

1. INTRODUCTION
Leadership studies have reached a critical theoretical saturation point. For decades, mainstream scholarship has relied on psychological traits, behavioural tendencies, and social influence theories to define leadership capacity. While these frameworks have contributed descriptive richness, they lack explanatory depth regarding decision-making under uncertainty. They offer little insight into why leaders succeed in crisis conditions, why unpredictable organisations stabilise under certain individuals, and why complex strategic choices remain resistant to rational forecasting. Leadership, as traditionally theorised, is still shaped by linear causality and individual personality constructs rooted in twentieth-century psychology. Yet the twenty-first century confronts leaders with radically new problem environments: financial volatility, geopolitical instability, pandemics, disruptive technologies, ecological collapse, and digital acceleration. These conditions demand conceptualisation beyond rational control. The emergence of neuroscience and complexity science provides new epistemological tools for addressing these domains, yet leadership theory has not fully integrated these advances.

Neuroscience demonstrates that human cognition does not operate through central command or stable trait modules, but rather through dynamic neural networks that reorganise according to task demands, emotional state, and environmental signal inputs (Bassett & Sporns, 2017). Parallel developments in complexity science show that organisations and societies are not mechanical structures but dynamic, multilevel systems characterised by feedback loops, emergent order, and nonlinear outcomes (Mitchell, 2009). Leadership, therefore, resides at the interface between two complex adaptive systems: the human brain and the social environment. This recognition demands a conceptual overhaul. Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory (NLT) offers such transformation by treating leadership as emergent neural–systemic adaptation rather than interior personality expression.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Traditional leadership frameworks have historically assumed that leadership capacity is a relatively stable property inherent to the individual, yet contemporary empirical science increasingly challenges these assumptions. Trait-based approaches, which posit that internal qualities such as intelligence, confidence, or sociability reliably predict leadership effectiveness, overlook the dynamic interplay between cognition, environment, and context (Pessoa, 2022). Neuroscientific evidence indicates that cognition and behavior are not static; rather, they continuously recalibrate in response to internal states, environmental signals, and social feedback, suggesting that leadership performance emerges from adaptive neural processes rather than fixed psychological attributes. Similarly, behavioral theories that emphasize observable actions or skill acquisition offer descriptive insight but fail to capture the origin of strategic creativity, intuition, and decision-making under high-pressure or time-

constrained conditions. Even transformational and charismatic leadership theories, which underscore emotional resonance, inspiration, and influence, cannot adequately explain why the same behavioral strategies yield success for some leaders while producing failure or stagnation for others operating in comparable contexts. These limitations highlight a critical theoretical gap: conventional approaches insufficiently account for the cognitive and systemic mechanisms that enable leaders to navigate uncertainty, complexity, and volatility.

Two contemporary fields provide the conceptual tools to address this gap. First, network neuroscience demonstrates that cognition emerges from distributed, dynamically interacting neural networks rather than isolated brain regions. Psychological functions such as perception, memory, attention, and decision-making rely on shifting configurations of large-scale networks, including the default mode network, frontoparietal control network, and salience network, which flexibly reconfigure depending on task demands, emotional states, and environmental inputs. This neural perspective reframes leadership not as a set of stable traits but as the capacity to coordinate and integrate these networks efficiently under stress and uncertainty. Second, complexity science conceptualizes organizations as adaptive systems comprised of interacting agents, feedback loops, and emergent properties. Within these systems, outcomes cannot be reliably predicted through linear planning or hierarchical command structures; rather, self-organization, phase transitions, and non-linear dynamics shape organizational evolution. Leaders, therefore, operate not in mechanistic environments but in ecologies where small perturbations can trigger cascading effects, requiring constant monitoring, pattern recognition, and adaptive responsiveness.

Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory (NLT) emerges at the intersection of these two perspectives, conceptualizing leadership as the emergent coupling between neural network dynamics and social complexity. Excellence in leadership arises not from detachment, charisma, or externally observable behaviors alone, but from the ability to integrate multilevel cognitive and contextual complexity into coherent decision outputs. Leaders excel when they can dynamically synthesize internal neural processes with environmental feedback, reorganize information efficiently under uncertainty, and leverage distributed patterns within both the brain and organizational networks to guide adaptive action. This theoretical positioning redefines leadership as a systemic, emergent property rather than a static attribute or singular behavioral repertoire.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF NLT

Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory rests on three mutually reinforcing scientific pillars that collectively provide a framework for understanding leadership as a cognitive–systemic phenomenon.

The first pillar derives from predictive processing theory, which conceptualizes the brain as a fundamentally predictive organ designed to minimize informational uncertainty. According to this framework, cognition is oriented toward generating internal models that anticipate environmental states, continually comparing predictions against sensory inputs to detect errors and adjust models accordingly (Friston, 2010). Within leadership contexts, this implies that effective decision-making under uncertainty is less about deliberate rational calculation and more about the speed and fidelity with which leaders update internal models relative to the pace at which environmental uncertainty evolves. Leaders who excel under volatile conditions demonstrate heightened sensitivity to prediction errors, enabling them to anticipate potential system shifts and adapt strategies proactively rather than reactively. This predictive capacity allows for dynamic scenario modeling, contingency planning, and the rapid integration of new information without succumbing to cognitive overload.

The second pillar draws from network neuroscience, which frames cognitive function as the emergent product of dynamically interacting neural systems. Leadership effectiveness is strongly associated with neural integration efficiency, defined as the capacity to synchronize and coordinate networks responsible for executive function, emotional regulation, and sensory processing under conditions of cognitive load. Empirical research demonstrates that measures of intelligence, creative problem-solving, and adaptive reasoning are correlated not with activity in any single brain region but with the flexibility, connectivity, and synchrony of distributed networks (Bassett & Sporns, 2017). Leaders with high neural integration can process multiple streams of information simultaneously, detect subtle environmental patterns, and balance affective responses with rational evaluation, producing coherent decision outputs even when faced with complex, ambiguous, or time-sensitive challenges.

The third pillar is complexity theory, which situates leadership within multilevel adaptive systems. Organizations, markets, and societies are not linear systems; they evolve through nonlinear interactions among agents whose behaviors generate emergent properties that defy central control. Within these environments, conventional hierarchical planning loses predictive power, and decision outcomes are highly sensitive to initial conditions, interdependencies, and feedback loops. Leaders operating under these conditions must develop an attunement to systemic patterns, enabling them to recognize emergent risks, identify opportunities for intervention, and harness self-organizing processes to guide collective action without imposing rigid control. Complexity theory, therefore, reinforces the NLT proposition that leadership is fundamentally about adaptive orchestration rather than authoritative command.

Together, these three pillars converge on a core conceptual assertion: leadership is a systemic emergent property shaped simultaneously by the structure and function of neural networks and the dynamic complexity of organizational and societal environments. By integrating predictive processing, network neuroscience, and complexity theory, NLT provides a coherent theoretical apparatus for explaining why certain individuals thrive in uncertain and volatile contexts, while others falter. Leadership, from this perspective, is neither fixed nor solely socially constructed; it emerges from the continuous, adaptive interplay between the brain's neural architecture and the environmental systems in which leaders operate.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership scholarship has historically spanned multiple disciplines, encompassing psychology, sociology, organisational theory, and, more recently, neuroscience and complexity science. Early research primarily emphasised trait theory, proposing that certain stable personal characteristics—such as intelligence, self-confidence, and sociability—predicted leadership effectiveness (Stogdill, 1948; Bass, 1990). While trait-based frameworks offered empirical metrics, their explanatory power proved limited under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. Subsequent behavioural theories shifted focus to observable leadership actions and decision-making processes, yet these models often overlooked the cognitive and neurobiological underpinnings of strategic thought (Lewin et al., 1939; Blake & Mouton, 1964).

The emergence of contingency and situational theories addressed contextual variation, arguing that leadership effectiveness is inseparable from environmental demands (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). These frameworks acknowledged that no single style could universally predict outcomes, yet they largely assumed rational actors and linear decision pathways, failing to capture the nonlinear dynamics observed in contemporary volatile environments. Similarly, transformational and charismatic leadership models highlighted influence, vision, and motivation (Bass, 1985; Avolio & Bass, 2004), emphasizing interpersonal dynamics and inspirational capability. Although these models offered powerful normative guidance, they left underexplored the neurocognitive mechanisms enabling rapid adaptation under uncertainty underexplored.

Recent developments in neuroscience and network theory provide critical insights bridging these gaps. Studies on large-scale brain networks reveal that cognition is fundamentally emergent, distributed across interacting neural modules, including the default mode network (DMN), frontoparietal control network (FPCN), and salience network (Seeley et al., 2007; Bassett & Sporns, 2017). Network neuroscience demonstrates that high-performing leaders display dynamic network flexibility, integrating affective, sensory, and executive information streams to respond adaptively to novel or uncertain conditions (Shine et al., 2019). Functional connectivity studies indicate that creativity, strategic foresight, and adaptive problem-solving emerge not from isolated brain regions but from the dynamic interplay of distributed circuits, reinforcing the notion that leadership is an emergent neurocomplex phenomenon.

Parallel to neuroscience, complexity science has redefined organisational and societal dynamics. Mitchell (2009) and Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018) describe organisations as complex adaptive systems characterized by feedback loops, nonlinearity, and emergent order. Within these frameworks, traditional hierarchies are insufficient: leadership requires continuous sensing, interpretation, and real-time adaptation. Complexity-informed approaches emphasize systemic cognition, where leaders' decisions are inseparable from environmental feedback and collective intelligence (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003). This aligns with findings in social network research, which show that organisational performance correlates with distributed knowledge flows and network connectivity rather than formal authority (Borgatti & Foster, 2003).

Emotion and affective neuroscience provide further depth. Leadership under uncertainty is inseparable from affect regulation. Studies demonstrate that stress triggers limbic activation, impacting prefrontal control and decision quality (Pessoa, 2022; McEwen & Morrison, 2013). Leaders who succeed under uncertainty exhibit enhanced neural integration, enabling affective signals to be incorporated into complex cognitive models rather than suppressed. These insights challenge classical rationalist models and support NLT's core proposition: leadership is not a fixed trait but a dynamic, neuro-systemic emergent property.

Finally, a growing body of work on AI, cognitive augmentation, and digital decision systems suggests that human leadership operates increasingly within technologically distributed environments (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Wang, 2019). NLT complements this perspective by situating the leader's neural dynamics as the primary engine of systemic cognition, which interacts synergistically with organisational networks, technological infrastructures, and socio-cultural context.

In sum, the literature converges on several points: leadership cannot be fully explained by stable traits, discrete behaviours, or formal authority; decision-making emerges through dynamic neural cognitive systemic interactions; and complex adaptive environments demand continuous integration of cognitive, emotional, and contextual information. These findings collectively provide the empirical foundation for Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory.

5. DECISION-MAKING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

NLT argues that all high-level leadership decisions occur under varying degrees of unpredictability and informational incompleteness. Under such conditions, rational planning becomes insufficient. Neuroscientific evidence shows that uncertainty activates salience and limbic networks, triggering emotional intensification and reducing deliberative function. Yet leadership excellence depends not on eliminating such responses but reconfiguring them into adaptive cognition through emotion regulation and network integration.

Empirical research demonstrates that expert decision-makers display higher neural variability and richer connectivity during uncertain tasks, enabling novel solution pathways (Garrett et al., 2013). This suggests that leadership intelligence involves embracing rather than suppressing uncertainty. NLT therefore defines leadership as a continuous process of entropy reduction through cognitive integration, pattern extraction, and reframing.

6. ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AS COGNITIVE PARTNER

A fundamental implication of Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory (NLT) is that leadership cognition is not confined within the individual brain; rather, it extends into the surrounding social and organizational context, forming a distributed cognitive system. The environment itself acts as an active participant in decision-making, with organizational structures, communication networks, and feedback loops functioning analogously to neural networks in the brain. Just as neural networks rely on dynamic connectivity and feedback for efficient processing (Bassett & Sporns, 2017), organizational networks shape the quality, speed, and accuracy of leadership cognition by mediating the flow of information, signals, and social cues. Empirical studies in organizational neuroscience suggest that leaders embedded within transparent, well-connected, and psychologically safe environments are better able to integrate diverse data streams, detect early warning signals, and enact adaptive strategies (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Conversely, organizational dysfunction—manifested through hierarchical rigidity, communication bottlenecks, institutional fear, or cultural silence—distorts the inputs available for cognitive modeling, impairing leaders' ability to anticipate, plan, and respond to emergent crises (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015). From a neurocomplexity perspective, leadership effectiveness therefore requires deliberate cultivation of the organizational environment as a cognitive partner. This includes designing adaptive structures, enhancing feedback pathways, and fostering a culture where information flows freely across hierarchical and disciplinary boundaries.

In the African leadership context, this dynamic is particularly salient. Many African organizations operate within post-colonial bureaucratic legacies characterized by hierarchical centralization and patronage networks, which historically suppress transparent communication and slow decision-making (Makinde, 2023). Leaders who successfully navigate these environments often rely on informal networks, community engagement, and culturally embedded knowledge flows to extend their cognitive reach beyond formal structures. By leveraging distributed organizational cognition, African leaders can mitigate structural constraints and foster emergent problem-solving processes that are adaptive to high-uncertainty contexts, such as political transitions, resource scarcity, or market volatility.

7. LEADERSHIP EMERGENCE AND IDENTITY FLUIDITY

Traditional leadership theories often conceptualize identity as a stable, internally possessed attribute, rooted in personality or social role. NLT fundamentally challenges this notion, proposing instead that leadership identity is emergent and dynamic, arising from continuous interaction between neural plasticity and social-environmental feedback. Identity, from this perspective, is not a fixed possession but the product of cognition–context coupling, continuously shaped by engagement with complex adaptive systems. Neuroscientific research demonstrates that repeated exposure to decision-making challenges and social feedback induces structural and functional changes in neural circuits associated with attention, self-regulation, and meta-cognition (Pessoa, 2022; Friston, 2010). This neuroplastic adaptation enables leaders to recalibrate their cognitive and emotional strategies, enhancing their capacity to manage uncertainty, resolve conflict, and orchestrate collective action.

Leadership, therefore, is not merely chosen or assigned; it emerges through cognitive transformation induced by sustained complexity exposure. Leaders in high-stakes environments such as African political or business contexts marked by volatility, institutional fragility, and socio-economic uncertainty often exhibit identity fluidity, adjusting their strategic and interpersonal repertoires in response to evolving challenges (Ndemo & Weiss, 2017). This emergent view also aligns with complexity-informed leadership studies, which suggest that effective leaders co-evolve with the systems they influence, continually reconfiguring both their cognitive frameworks and social behaviors to align with environmental exigencies (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). In this way, leadership is an adaptive process rather than a static attribute.

8. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE REFRAMED THROUGH NEUROSCIENCE

Emotional intelligence (EI) has historically been conceptualized in sociopsychological terms, emphasizing interpersonal perception, empathy, and regulation as learned competencies. NLT reframes EI neurobiologically, situating it within distributed networks linking limbic and prefrontal regions. These networks enable the regulation of affective responses, integration of emotional signals into cognitive evaluation, and maintenance of functional coherence under stress (Pessoa, 2022). Leaders capable of sustaining network synchrony between the anterior cingulate cortex, ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and insular cortex demonstrate heightened resilience, balanced affective processing, and superior decision-making under uncertainty (Bechara & Damasio, 2005; Garrett et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence thus emerges not merely as a behavioral skill but as a reflection of neural network coordination, where effective regulation of stress and anxiety allows leaders to maintain adaptive strategic foresight and social influence.

In African organizational contexts, where leaders frequently confront environments of political instability, resource volatility, and culturally complex stakeholder networks, neurobiologically grounded EI provides a critical advantage. Leaders who can modulate affective responses in real-time, integrate distributed social signals, and translate emotional complexity into strategic insight are better positioned to foster trust, navigate ambiguity, and mobilize diverse constituencies (Makinde, 2023; Ndemo & Weiss, 2017; Mangori & Moleka, 2021; Moleka, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). NLT emphasizes that such capacities are trainable through targeted interventions that promote neural integration, stress tolerance, and adaptive social cognition rather than mere behavioral coaching.

8. CREATIVITY, INTUITION, AND INNOVATION AS NEURAL COMPLEXITY FUNCTIONS

Creativity and intuition, often framed in leadership literature as charismatic or inexplicable traits, can be reinterpreted through the lens of neural complexity. Evidence from network neuroscience indicates that creative insight arises from dynamic interactions between the default mode network, responsible for associative thinking and mental simulation, and the executive control network, responsible for goal-directed reasoning and problem-solving (Beaty et al., 2016; Bassett & Sporns, 2017). Leaders who anticipate systemic shifts, innovate strategies, and generate novel solutions exhibit heightened network integration, enabling cognitive flexibility, rapid reconfiguration of mental models, and exploitation of emergent patterns within organizational or societal systems. Intuition, in this framework, is not mystical but constitutes rapid predictive processing based on accumulated experience, neural pattern recognition, and cognitive simulation of alternative futures (Kahneman, 2011; Friston, 2010).

For African leadership, the capacity to harness creativity and intuition is particularly critical. Leaders operating in markets, governance systems, and civil society networks with high uncertainty often lack complete data and formalized infrastructures, necessitating reliance on predictive modeling, scenario improvisation, and innovative problem-solving (Ndemo & Weiss, 2017; Makinde, 2023). By fostering neural network integration and systemic thinking, leaders can generate actionable insights from incomplete information, turning environmental complexity into a cognitive resource rather than a liability. Creativity and intuition, therefore, emerge as adaptive neural strategies that enable leaders to navigate volatility, drive innovation, and catalyze organizational or societal transformation.

9. AFRICAN LEADERSHIP AND MARGINALITY APPLICATIONS

Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory (NLT) offers particular explanatory power for African leadership contexts, which are characterized by historical, socio-political, and structural particularities that generate high levels of volatility and uncertainty. African leaders often operate in environments marked by political instability, resource scarcity, rapid technological change, demographic transitions, and institutional voids. Marginalised communities frequently contend with bureaucratic opacity, socio-economic precarity, and limited access to formal decision-making structures. In such contexts, conventional leadership models predicated on linear authority, rational planning, or fixed personality traits are insufficient to account for successful strategic outcomes (Makinde, 2023; Ndemo & Weiss, 2017).

NLT provides a framework for understanding why certain African leaders navigate these complex landscapes effectively, while others fail. Leaders capable of integrating neural plasticity, predictive processing, and system-level awareness are better positioned to absorb informational entropy, detect emergent patterns, and translate environmental uncertainty into adaptive strategies. In East Africa, for instance, community-based leaders often emerge outside formal institutional channels, leveraging relational influence, social networks, and adaptive cognition to coordinate collective action. Such leadership exemplifies NLT's emphasis on emergent cognitive–systemic coupling, where authority is less a function of position and more a property of networked integration (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Marginality itself can act as a cognitive advantage. Leaders operating from peripheral positions frequently develop heightened uncertainty tolerance, complex pattern recognition, and sophisticated network navigation skills—capacities mirrored in neural mechanisms described by NLT, such as distributed network connectivity, cognitive flexibility, and rapid predictive modeling (Pessoa, 2022; Garrett et al., 2013). These competencies allow leaders to respond to unpredictable conditions, anticipate social dynamics, and innovate under constraints, highlighting how peripheral positioning can enhance adaptive capacity rather than limit influence.

African applications of NLT also have practical implications for leadership development and institutional design. Leadership programs should prioritize experiential learning in high-uncertainty environments, cultivation of neurocognitive skills, and development of distributed organizational intelligence. Training must focus on enhancing network integration, adaptive cognition, and emotional resilience, enabling leaders to function as nodes within broader socio-systemic networks rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical authority. Additionally, digital and technological augmentation—such as mobile platforms, AI-based decision support systems, and participatory data networks—can extend cognitive reach, create real-time feedback loops, and facilitate collective intelligence, allowing African leaders to circumvent structural limitations and cultivate adaptive governance (Makinde, 2023; Ndemo & Weiss, 2017).

10. DISCUSSION

The broader implications of NLT extend beyond African contexts to global leadership theory, organizational design, and education. NLT challenges conventional frameworks that emphasize static traits, linear decision-making, or purely behavioral approaches. Instead, it positions leadership as a dynamic, emergent property arising from the integration of neural architecture, cognitive processing, and socio-environmental complexity. This perspective demands rethinking leadership training, selection, and institutional development. Rather than focusing on behavioral technique alone, educational interventions should target network integration through diverse epistemic exposure, emotional resilience cultivation, and interdisciplinary cognitive experiences (Bassett & Sporns, 2017; Beaty et al., 2016). Organizational evaluation should similarly shift from managerial compliance metrics to measures of uncertainty tolerance, cognitive complexity, and adaptive network functioning.

NLT also provides insight into leadership failure and collapse. Extreme stress or environmental volatility can disrupt neural synchronization, producing cognitive fragmentation, impulsivity, and tunnel vision. By identifying the neurobiological and systemic conditions that precipitate collapse, NLT offers a framework for resilience-building interventions, organizational redesign, and policy development aimed at preserving cognitive coherence under high uncertainty (Friston, 2010; Garrett et al., 2013). Furthermore, the theory emphasizes the role of cultural variance, recognizing that neural development and cognitive strategies are profoundly influenced by socio-cultural contexts. Leadership research, therefore, must incorporate global epistemologies and avoid assuming universality based on Euro-American models (Pessoa, 2022; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

11. CONCLUSION

Neurocomplexity Leadership Theory represents a paradigm shift in leadership scholarship by integrating neuroscience, complexity science, and organizational theory into a cohesive model capable of explaining leadership emergence, failure, and adaptation under uncertainty. NLT reframes leadership as a biological, cognitive, and systemic phenomenon, rather than a static internal attribute, emphasizing the co-evolution of neural networks, cognitive strategies, and environmental feedback systems. The theory provides actionable insights for leadership development, institutional design, and technological augmentation, demonstrating that effective leadership arises from the dynamic integration of brain, system, and context.

In African and marginality contexts, NLT highlights the transformative potential of adaptive cognition, networked intelligence, and emergent problem-solving. Leaders who leverage these capacities can navigate complex socio-political landscapes, turn structural constraints into opportunities, and foster resilient, adaptive governance. By situating leadership within a neurocomplexity framework, NLT offers both a scientifically grounded and contextually sensitive model that transcends traditional trait-based and behavioral paradigms, providing a robust foundation for future empirical research, neuroimaging studies, and leadership interventions tailored to high-uncertainty environments globally.

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