

Leadership decision-making strategies using appreciative inquiry: a case study

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Abstract: This study involved a Colorado public charter high school using appreciative inquiry (AI) to provide leadership of the organisation with strategic, decision-making that aids in the creation of a new teaching curriculum. Leadership discovered an effective means of change to its academic curriculum for the school year 2009–2010 and assisted with the schools charter renewal. A series of focus meetings and individual interviews were held to identify four core competencies for the school and its leadership. Discovering how to implement this change while keeping this vibrant organisation alive allowed it to function as a cohesive whole. AI is a positive design-based approach in organisation development and focuses on the generative aspects within an organisation to celebrate, recognise and foster the actions that the organisation is accomplishing well. The school's principal envisioned a picture of what the school's future should look like using AI to identify strategic ideas to apply to decision-making that would embrace a new and improved vision for the school.

Keywords: core competencies; AI; appreciative inquiry; strategic modes.

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1 Introduction

The goal of this project was to explore a strategic focus to create a new and improved educational curriculum while preparing for a state-authorised review and charter renewal. Charter schools are attended by choice and provide an alternative to traditional public schools; they are part of the public education system. Appreciative inquiry (AI) was used as a process of discovery for improving effective leadership. The leader of CIVA Charter High School tasked with ensuring a successful charter renewal for his school is Principal, Randy Zimmerman. New change concepts of AI were introduced to all staff and used to create an influential presentation for the overseeing charter renewal board.

1.1 Appreciative inquiry

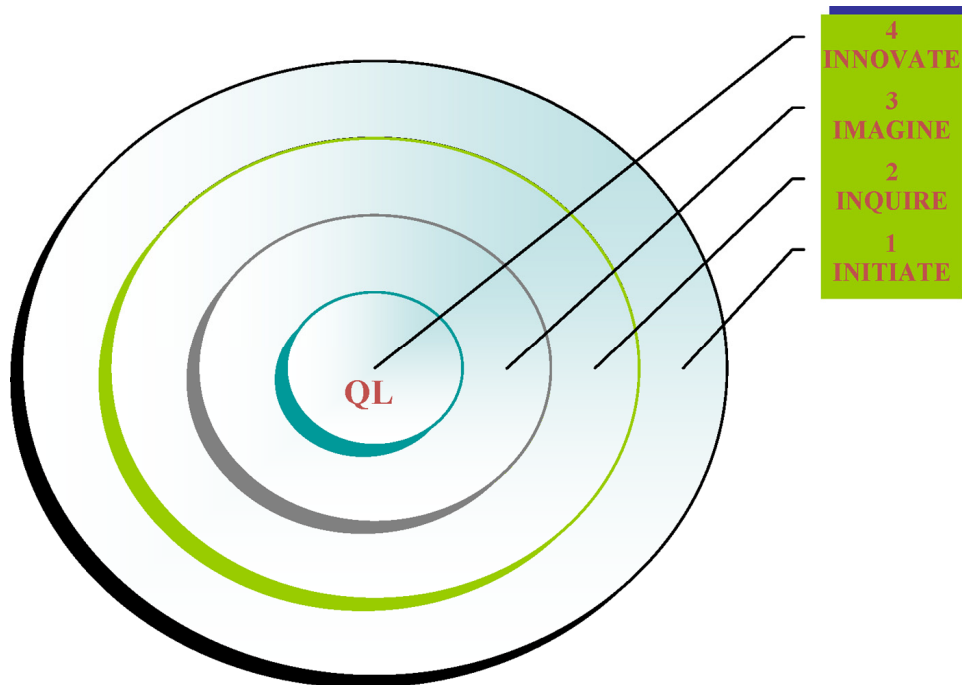
AI is an innovative, organisational development (OD) change method that focuses on the positive aspects in an organisation. Other change methods focus on identifying problems in organisations and producing a fix-it approach and interventions. This is known as a post-positivist approach which looks at the reality of the organisation as a pre-existing condition (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). Creswell (2009) asserts that there are four worldviews for researchers to consider when understanding how their area of interest should be looked at and may also explain why a particular research design was chosen. The four worldviews are post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory and pragmatism. The appropriate worldview for this process-consulting project is viewed through the lens of pragmatism as it focuses on what is already working well within the organisation and celebrates its known accomplishments.

The AI method uses the social-constructionist approach to build on and reframe the organisation's foundational reality as it capitalises on the strengths and existing infrastructure. This method allows for new creation of organisational group theory to aid in change and development of an organisation (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). According to Bushe (2010), if the tool is not used correctly and the organisation is not honest in their intent, the process may sabotage the original objectives that the organisation had set out to accomplish.

1.2 The AI model

This AI model is twofold, based on the AI processes and strategic design. The AI process is commonly described using the 4D cycle (discover, dream, design and deliver). However, for this project, the 4I's model (Figure 1) consisting of the steps of *initiate*, *inquire*, *imagine* and *innovate* will be utilised as developed by researchers Mohr and Jacobsgard (Watkins and Mohr, 2001). They believe that this methodology is best suited for the client in an academic environment. This concept considers the groups' goals in mind, where participants consider how to apply AI to decision-making. "As they compose strategies to achieve their 'provocative' propositions local people [teachers/participants] incorporate the qualities of community [school] life that they want to protect and the relationships that they want to achieve [student/parent]" (Mikkelsen, 2005, p.222).

Figure 1 Appreciative inquiry 4-I model (see online version for colours)



Source: Adapted from Coghlan et al. (2003, p.12).

2 Case background

The leader of CIVA Charter High School, a college preparatory high school, explored decision-making to enhance his existing curriculum. CIVA stands for character, integrity, vision and the arts. The school located in Colorado Springs, CO, USA, is committed to

ensuring collegiate success through a focus on academics, visual and performing arts, character, education and athletics (CIVA Charter School (CIVA), 2009). CIVA is the only charter high school serving a general population of students in the largest school district in Colorado Springs, CO, with ~50% of the students within the immediate district (Colorado Springs School District 11, 2009) and 50% from neighbouring districts. The guiding philosophy of CIVA is based on strong effective principles designed to ensure growth in character and academic success.

2.1 The circumstances

CIVA's leader needed to present to the charter renewal committee a synopsis of its dynamic curriculum that illustrates how CIVA provides an exceptional educational experience to its student body. To accomplish this, the principal involved his teachers, support staff, those involved parents and even students, to contribute to this important task. It would be necessary to convey with clarity and conviction the multiplicity of and at times difficult tasks teachers experience in their daily classroom environment. All classroom teachers have participating students with various learning levels and academic needs. Teachers have more than one lesson plan for each of their classes to accommodate the many learning levels and document the students' progress and achievements. Many students require individual academic interventions such as modifications to their assignments, different projects or other various adjustments to their academic courses. These modifications, interventions and academic changes to a student's curriculum must be documented according to school district policy in conjunction with daily instruction, grading papers, weekly testing and providing feedback on homework assignments. Teachers provide this individualised accommodation as additional to their duties and responsibilities in the classroom. CIVA's educational environment has a behind the scenes integrated support of involved parents, administrative staff and many dedicated students. All of these participants share the outcome of the charter renewal committee's findings and recommendations. Their goal was renewal of CIVA's charter.

3 Method

3.1 Population sample

The Colorado Springs School District 11, that encompasses CIVA Charter High School, is made up of over 100 administrators, academic core teachers such as English, Maths, Science, History, Foreign Language, counsellors, special education teachers, non-core requirement teachers in the subjects of art, music, choir, gym, as well as teachers for subjects in computer technologies and typing. At CIVA Charter High School, a sample size of ten was utilised that encompassed all of the previously mentioned areas of education. The sample included an administrator, four core teachers, three non-core teachers, a counsellor and a secretary. All of these positions and their different roles play a key part in allowing CIVA to function at an optimal integrative level. Acknowledging the fact that AI uses all positive reflections to focus on the strengths and successes currently in an organisation, the principal approved this project. All the participants signed an interview consent form and were assured that their data responses would remain anonymous.

3.2 Procedure

Data was collected using in-person and over the phone interviews. However, all participants were present for the group exercises and discussions that took place at the school during the school year. The purpose of the AI project was explained to all and consent forms for interviews and participation were obtained. At the first group meeting, the beginning phase of strategic planning, all participants with whom the process of AI was thoroughly explained were guided through some preliminary exercises to confirm their understanding. The preliminary exercises involved the telling of a story, by each participant, that reminded them of a positive experience, result or memory of an interaction within the CIVA school environment followed by identification of the key words that defined the feelings and emotions from their experience. The participants were able to discuss and provide input to identify the core values that kept CIVA vibrant and relevant to them. The appreciative 4I model was utilised to guide the project through its data collection. The 4I model encompasses *initiate*, *inquire*, *imagine* and *innovate* components. The questions that were asked followed the 4I line of thinking, but were specifically written to direct the focus back to the continuation of the AI enhanced curriculum.

3.3 Initiate

To initiate, the first preliminary meeting was held with the original four administrators to explain the theory of AI, and its uses in practical application. The entire group of participants then met and shared stories about positive past experiences they had with each other while working at CIVA. They were asked to identify key behaviours, feelings and attitudes that they felt during these experiences. After sharing all of the stories, the key words that were identified by the participants were captured on post-it notes. The notes were placed on a large piece of poster board and the team was asked to group similar key words together. Once the key words were grouped, the team deliberated on one word that would encompass all of the key words in each grouped area. It was then pointed out that this process created the four most valued core competencies for CIVA. The core competencies identified were leadership, expectations, integrity and commitment. These core competencies were found to be the most important attributes that keep CIVA functioning. The teachers and administrators promised to use the skill of *reframing* (Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006) with each other for the rest of the week until we met as a group again.

3.4 Inquire

At the next meeting, all the participants had many areas they wanted to work on. For example, teachers wanted to know how to keep students behaviour focused as well as their academics. Another asked, 'How do we get the parents of the students involved in their success and supportive of our educational focus?' Comments were made regarding the discipline of a student and how it is not always supported at home or that the consequence of a student's infraction at school does not carry through to the home environment.

3.5 *Imagine*

Looking at the questions from our inquiry phase, all in the group were instructed to imagine what CIVA would look like if the students and parents were aligned with the teacher goals. Teachers would be able to share concerns regarding students in a group setting that would not single them out, yet provide a growth opportunity for all involved.

3.6 *Innovate*

The first part of the plan was to interview all of the participants (teachers and staff) and to ask them how they would be able to contribute to new direction, vision and recent imagination shared by all at the most recent CIVA meeting. The participants were given an anonymous opportunity to the interviewer to vent any concerns that they had or even possible barriers that they felt existed that may hinder their contributions to future tasks. This allowed any reservations they may have had to be brought to the surface and reframed into more constructive thinking by the interviewer.

3.7 *Data collection*

Qualitative data was collected by conducting individual interviews of the sample population ($n = 10$). The purpose of the data is to obtain a complete, detailed description from each respondent to formulate collaborative 'possibility propositions'. During the interview, each respondent's response was notated by the researcher to later analyse and summarise for reporting purposes. To protect the identity of each respondent in the sample population, alphanumeric codes were created for each. The sample consisted of 40% males and 60% females.

Q1: What attracted you to work here at CIVA? If you had to describe your first impression in one word, what would it be?

Findings: About 60% ($n = 6$) of the interviewees that responded to this question, 30% of respondents indicated diversity as main attractor. By diversity, the interviewees indicated regardless of one's race, sexual orientation, learning and physical abilities or disabilities.

Q2: In our group meeting at CIVA, we identified leadership as a core value. Can you tell me something more about it? What about leadership is important to you? What one word would you use to describe leadership that is most important?

Findings: About 100% ($n = 10$) interviewees sought a leader who was strong (firm), experienced and a risk-taker, overall at 60% out of the ten responses.

Q3: In our group meeting at CIVA, we identified expectations as a core value. Can you tell me something more about it? What about expectations is important to you? What one word would you use to describe your expectations here at CIVA?

Findings: In 100% ($n = 10$), 40% believed that being focused was most important, while 30% thought flexibility was more important.

Q4: In our group meeting at CIVA, we identified integrity as a core value. Can you tell me something more about it? What about integrity is important to you? What one word would you use to describe integrity that is most important?

Findings: In 100% ($n = 10$), the two words that respondents selected the most were honesty and fairness.

Q5: In our group meeting at CIVA, we identified commitment as a core value. Can you tell me something more about it? What about commitment is important to you? What one word would you use to describe what commitment means to you?

Findings: Among 100% interviewees, about 50% viewed loyalty as the most important consideration when remaining committed to CIVA.

Q6: Thinking as CIVA being the most successful, model, trendsetter, popular, attention getting organisation you have ever known. What would this picture look like to you in five years?

Findings: In 100% ($n = 10$), the desires of the staff was to know the vision and direction of the school, maintain consistency and creativity.

Q7: If you had to introduce a brand new concept to students and it was critical to keep it positive so they would accept the new information, how would you perform this task? Which step was most important? What one word defines the first thing to do?

Findings: About 100% ($n = 10$) of the interviewees responded to this question. The overwhelming response from teachers and staff alike to demonstrate! About 70% viewed demonstration as the most critical step to exploring a new concept with students.

4 Validation

As the school year ended with teachers and staff leaving for summer break, the possibility propositions that follow in this paper have been created based on interviews and group meetings with the participants. Careful verification of the participants responses was conducted over the phone by using a process of restatement to validate that the meaning of their responses was captured accurately.

5 Possibility propositions

A possibility proposition is a future visionary statement about what is current and what the future may bring. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) emphasise that these statements are made to be provocative, go outside the normal barriers of what is, defy general hypothesis or everyday practices and propose preferred potential for the organisation and its stakeholders. In addition, the possibility proposition must also be linked to past successes. It expresses the positive representation (from the visionary phase) of the model organisation (p.148).

The four possibility proposition statements illustrated below aligned with emphasis on strategic planning. These statements were to be presented to the CIVA teachers and staff before leadership presented the new curriculum and the charter renewal project:

- Leadership at CIVA values the input of staff members in its decision-making. Leadership blends well with the diversity seen at CIVA and allows flexibility of tasks. The leadership remains trustworthy in nature in developing the future picture.
- CIVA staff competently balance their work expectations and home life. All staff members did agree that the balance between their work expectations and home life was critical.
- The environment at CIVA has an open communication attribute that allows for honesty and fairness to prevail. The ending result of this core value is loyalty to each other and CIVA.
- Dedication and focus of the task of educating students academically and continuous enhancement of their character has been the integral focus at CIVA.

6 Strategic tools

Mintzberg's (1973) three modes of strategy development provide an academic lens for leadership to apply strategic decision-making skills to the educational culture and personnel challenges that the new high school curriculum presents. This will be helpful to analyse the types of decisions that are made by leadership, staff and teachers when interacting with the students and what mode of strategic thinking applies. The strategic decision-making that leadership should employ to effectively implement the new curriculum and align it with the CIVA mission will be analysed using Mintzberg's (1973) three strategy modes – entrepreneurial, adaptive and planning. These modes of decision-making can be linked to the decisions and actions that teachers may use during class time at CIVA. The *entrepreneurial* mode contains four key elements of strategy-making (p.45). Two elements within this mode lend specific assistance to the educational arena. The first actively seeks opportunities rather than investigate problem solving. This element of the entrepreneurial mode applies to the need to think and adapt quickly to assign corrective consequences and allow a student to be accountable for their actions. For example, if a student is talking when a teacher is attempting to lecture, applying this element would be moving the student's seat to a new location, rather than asking them to stop talking or discussing why they were talking during the lecture. The second element under the entrepreneurial mode is the growth of an organisation. According to Mintzberg, this is the most important and the most concrete of the four elements as it leads to the overall objective of achievement (p.46).

Mintzberg states that the *adaptive* mode is an element that seems to apply to this educational case. This element decentralises the transfer of power and authority, does not set specific clear goals early on and allows for the nurturing of a creative group environment (p.46). Decisions that affect teachers and staff now all have the same power assigned with problem seeking as the focus. In a CIVA board meeting, this may be observed when the teachers and staff are invited to share in the calendar of events for the school year.

Mintzberg’s third mode of strategy is the *planning* mode (p.47). The planning mode has three characteristics to consider. The first characteristic employs the planning analyst alongside the manager and has the accountability to analyse policies and apply administrative techniques to the formation of strategies (p.48). The second characteristic focuses on systematic analysts that consecutively apply problem solving and the search for new opportunities for the organisation while considering costs and benefits (p.48). The final characteristic of the planning mode combines organisational strategies and decisions to reveal the unified approach towards global endeavours (p.48). Using these strategic modes for applying practical guidelines is only a beginning, as it is equally important to consider concepts and meanings why these guidelines should exist. CIVA leadership’s experiential background and past performance as a principal employs all three of these characteristics. The first is his commitment to discuss decisions with his board and office staff allowing him to think things through before he implements action. The second is he empowers his teachers as systematic analysts that can function as his forward scouts to provide information regarding problems before they become critical and identify opportunities for the further growth of CIVA. The third is always making a conscious effort to maintain a unified focus that will aid in CIVA Charter High School’s sustainability.

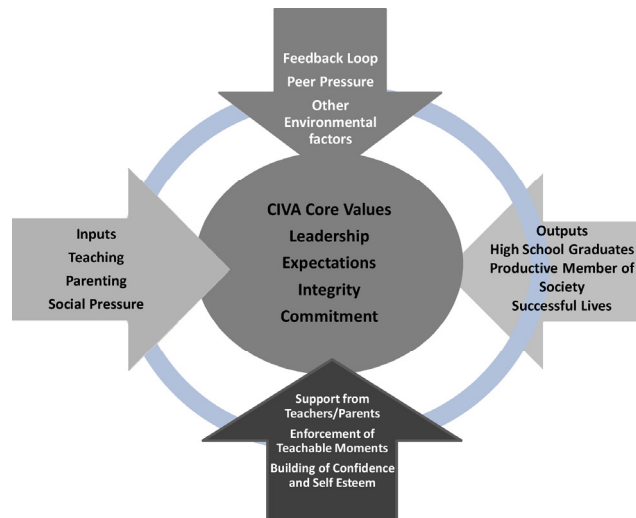
6.1 Strategic intervention

Strategic intervention components include: integrated strategic change, organisation design and culture change.

6.2 Teachers as practitioner

Core value relationships to CIVA Charter High School outputs can be seen in the following figure.

Figure 2 Systems map (see online version for colours)



6.2.1 CIVA's teachers as practitioners

CIVA's teachers and staff can be viewed through the lens of practitioners, in that practitioners must use care to align the educational direction they wish to explore to bring about practical results. In CIVA's case teachers must align the educational direction they wish to take their students with their creation of lesson plans to bring about the schools' goals and results. Jarvis (1999) states that we need theory as a basis to understand what direction of study we want to explore, but it cannot replace an actual hands-on case with examples and practical application. CIVA, e.g. by learning the AI methodology and applying it to their existing educational processes will be able to identify future areas for improvement. Improvement mostly presents when there is reflection in action that provides for opportunities for growth. These themes seem to be captured with the stories that were shared by the administrators, staff and teachers. Extrapolating what was described in the stories from the educators is actually identified as reflection in action and reflection on action.

6.3 Reflection in action

According to Schön (1987), to understand reflection in action thinking, we must realise when and how we are engaged in our own practice to become adept at applying corrective action. Schön explains that we know how to do more than we know how to explain. CIVA administrators, staff and teachers who will learn the use of reframing reality will be able to capitalise on teachable moments. Teachable moments present in various ways in and out of the classroom. A teachable moment allows for an educator the opportunity to imprint the impact of a behaviour, an academic lesson or a desirable character value into a student's evolving sphere of knowledge. While reflection in action enhances the existing teachable moment, reflection on action allows for analysis of the effectiveness or impact of the moment. CIVA educators are particularly cognizant of recognising, grasping and using each teachable moment however fleeting that moment might be.

6.4 Reflection on action

Reflection on action is more of a proactive approach to reflection in action thinking (Schön, 1987). When an individual executes as a reflection in action thinker, they do so because the situation encountered requires spontaneous on-hands immediate response. Once the immediate need for decision and action passes, the individual can proceed with the reflection on action thinking process. This is the analysis that follows the decisions and actions that were taken where one can reflect on what was done, how it was executed and why. For example, following a meeting with staff and teachers when a problem has been identified, the principal may ask for several ideas to consider as solutions, then explore the use of each with his staff before deciding the appropriate course of action to apply. This deliberately insightful action should be able to contribute to the improved outcome of any future changes and alert the need for repeat focus on specific leadership issues.

7 Recommendations

7.1 Elements to successful change

There are five key elements to employ while driving a successful change management programme for CIVA using AI:

Motivating change: The good news is that the board, staff, teachers and even the students are always motivated to change and improve CIVA. Leadership allows them to be creative and take risks to bring about long-time sustainable improvements.

Creating a vision: During this project, CIVA's principal, teachers staff and students were all focused on presenting the best and most effective presentation to the charter renewal board to obtain their charter continuation. With this vision in mind, they explained what CIVA is like from all perspectives. Leadership, teachers, staff and even the students stood before the charter renewal board presenting speeches as to why the school be allowed to continue its educational focus and mission.

Developing political support: Cummings and Worley (2009) state that by assessing the change agent power, an OD consultant can determine the best way to influence the employees in the organisation to accept, perform and embrace change (2009). CIVA must know its key stakeholders to gain their support of the changes they wish to make to their school environment and align their acceptance and funding to accomplish their goals.

Managing the transition: Leaders manage the change activities, commitment and operations planning. This enables the organisation making the transition to move from its current state to its desired state. CIVA holds regular meetings with administration and staff to manage reports and check the status of desired changes.

Sustaining momentum: As the OD consultants take the organisation through all of these change elements, it is important to keep the focus, commitment and momentum of the desired change of the organisation to aid its employees to see it through. Going forward leadership will continue striving towards their goals and objectives.

7.2 Envisioning what is possible

The best way for CIVA to remain sustainable is to continue to involve all the stakeholders in its vision and mission. Leadership will continue to look at his decision-making from all perspectives before taking action. CIVA will continue to flourish and will become Colorado's top charter school in the state.

8 Implications

Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006) state that understanding what constitutes the missing link between intelligence and success can shape the desired outcome when appreciative intelligence is applied. Therefore, the implications for CIVA to succeed by focusing on the positive aspects of 'what is' and the knowledge already known to envision their future direction brings the prospect of reaching any goal they undertake. This may position

CIVA to be a trendsetter and a model for success and sustainability that other charter schools may follow once the best practices and procedures are shared.

9 Discussion

The core competencies of the four administrators were not shared with the larger group to keep from swaying their responses to the questions leading up to their belief of the core competencies. The following week, with the entire group present the core value responses produced the combined group's four key competencies *leadership, expectations, integrity* and *commitment* which did not match what the initial four administrators provided at an earlier point in the project. Under different circumstances and with all of the members participating, a group dynamics known as the Asch paradigm (Asch, 1956) might have been present in which a contributing member of a group will simply go along with what the majority may have ruled to avoid social pressure. Asch believed that social influences, past experiences, watching other's judgements and behaviours and overall social pressure in a group setting could mold an individual's behaviour, making them conform once in that group. A researcher should be aware of the possibility of the Asch paradigm as a factor in group responses.

The data collected was shared with the leader at CIVA. The principal, Randy Zimmerman, acted on this information by establishing a focus for the teachers, involving students by asking them to create a video that they would share with others that explains why they liked CIVA and what the charter school had to offer. In addition, he continued to work with the CIVA board of directors to prepare for the upcoming charter renewal. Principal Zimmerman shared the common goals, objectives and mission with every possible stakeholder. Looking back at the data findings, Principal Zimmerman was strong, flexible, remained focused and continues to nurture a diverse and safe environment for all. This case study is an example of how the use of AI can truly lead an organisation to a sustainable growth for years to come. This year 2011, Principal Randy Zimmerman was awarded the Charter School of the Year award by the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

10 Conclusion

CIVA created an organisational climate and forum for all staff participants and accepted ownership of the task. All were included in the different steps of the charter renewal and their suggestions and concerns were heard. According to Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006), another way a leader can keep staff motivated and feeling valued is by removing barriers that hinder their ability to perform their daily job tasks. In this case, the leader empowered and included all to share in the main reason why this education charter school continues to thrive. CIVA will continue to grow its academic success while nurturing the core competencies that keep it vibrant and sustainable.

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