

Working Groups

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revised (again, in 2010) by SLC for 9.68 and 9.70

Groups are ubiquitous and basic human social systems. Participating with others in the organization and development of goal-oriented groups that "work" is a commonplace task. And yet the participants may know very little about what it means to make a group work well, ethically, and effectively. Further to the point, where group structure and functions are poorly understood the organization and development process is prone to mismanagement. On the other hand, where the "demand characteristics" of the situation receive the attention they warrant, the prospects for success are far greater. This brief article – intended to provide some additional background – looks at a number of basic features of groups and some desiderata of good "group work." It also suggests some ways that you and your groupmates/classmates can foster sustainable (e.g. scientifically credible, ethically appropriate and practically effective) group organization and development in the present instance.

In the beginning (according to the official story) was an individual - and then a pair.

Let us take this dyad -- this putatively sexually dimorphic and quintessentially human couple; as the first prototypically human group or social system. Anyhow, they subsequently supposedly misbehaved, were banished and began begetting others. In the second generation, fractious fraternal disagreements broke out and battles were fought over the proper use of natural resources. Agriculturalists and pastoralists vied for control over local carrying capacities and the frictions associated with the pressure of living and working together among others of their own kind(s) led to tensions within, between and among human individuals and groups. This soon descended into chaos and conflict; Cain and his progeny settled in the land of Nod; and people have been having trouble dealing with differences within, between and among individuals and groups ever since.

Why don't we get along? According to one popular view, the problem is that we are "only human" and the sources of conflict are rooted in our flawed "human nature." (cf. the allegedly inborn and transgenerational inheritance of "original sin").

We will later examine this issue quite closely, but, suffice it for the moment to say that an acceptance of this view has some nontrivial consequences. For, if we choose to accept this "explanation", then the possibility of ever solving "the problems of our social life" (as Einstein like to call them) is forever foreclosed. Why? Because, as the old saying has it: "you can't change human nature.") Moreover, if we are doomed by dint of our neurobiological makeup, then there are good grounds for despair, cynicism and nihilism.

And, of course, it is true beyond argument that we humans have all sorts of limitations – including some that are strongly and deeply and deterministically fixed in the neurobiological nature of our

particular protohominid primate species. (These include, but are not necessarily limited to mental and behavioral limitations that condition and constrain our capacity to comprehend and to influence (for better or worse) the social situations in which we find ourselves.

For present purposes let us focus instead on some features of group organization and development that we can understand and make practical use of.

When people work together in groups, there are several quite separate and distinct sets of issues involved. One set of issues relates to the group's goal or *task* and what it will take to get the job done. Frequently this is the only set of issues to which group members consciously and explicitly pay any serious attention; the only ones deemed worth defining and dealing with.

The second set of issues relates to the ***process of organization and development***; the ways in which the group defines and deals with the challenge of transforming a mere collection of separate and distinct individuals into a collaborative unit or system

When all members pay due attention to the need for them to work well together in creating and maintaining a collaborative context appropriate to both task and process, the overall quality of the group's performance can be enhanced.

In the normal course of events, crises of group development everywhere and always arise. Where these crises are anticipated and recognized and understood and dealt with satisfactorily, the group's social cohesiveness and collaborative task-orientation is strengthened. Where they are unanticipated, unrecognized, misunderstood and unsatisfactorily dealt with the value of the group itself may be undermined and its general effectiveness destroyed.

Ideally, explicit and principled self-management of the group organization and development process must be consensually agreed upon. This will facilitate the communication of negative and positive feedbacks that can help to enhance the value of the group to its members, complement individual contributions, and lead to outcomes many times better and more creative than those that might be achievable by its individual members working separately.

It is this *synergy* which gives working groups their great value in organizational contexts. And despite the possible problems that must be faced and the time and effort (and expense) that must be spent facilitating and evaluating the group formation process, the process itself is systematically comprehensible. Indeed, as we encounter it here in the evolving pedagogical context of a university classroom the process of group development will be found to possess a characteristic (indeed, "paradigmatic") "structure."

Ponder this. You are both participating in and observing an unfolding process that is marked, inter alia, by various "crises" involving differences between previously habitual personal patterns of thought, feeling, and action (on the one hand) and the emerging beliefs, values and practices prevailing within the group.

A key to what follows is a simple idea: **groups are human social systems with a life cycle.** This means that in a given group formation process, definite organization and development issues may be

expected to arise. In most cases, group formation follows a more or less consistent trajectory. Insofar as particular moments of crisis are characteristically or normally encountered along the way, the process from beginning to end can be plausibly parsed into various stages or phases; each marked by certain recognizable normal, natural and predictable "crises."

And herein lies one of the major lessons to be learned in 9.70 and 9.68: the crises that will arise at various stages of development of this class and its subsystems, have a generic aspect. That is to say, they have their counterparts in many other situations as well. Where the system lifecycle is understood as such and these normal crises are identified and confronted and resolved as such by the group itself, they can be made to play a creative role in the system lifecycle. As the semester proceeds, you should find it increasingly easy and fun and instructive to pay due attention to the group development process. Indeed, in this class, "process discussions" in which we reflect on what is happening, who we are, what we have been experiencing, and where we are trying to go, should more and more become - along with "task discussions" -- a normal and necessary part of each and all individual and group activities.

What is a Group?

A number of people working in the same room, or even on a common project might be described as a human social group. But this way of thinking about it misses the essence of what social psychologists mean when they use the phrase "group process."

For example, when a class is organized and run in a conventionally hierarchical, autocratic, fully scripted, top-down manner, the locus of control is fixed and participants have few if any opportunities to interact meaningfully with each other or with the instructors about the form and content of the work they are responsible for doing or the ways in which they are expected to do it.

Further to the point, autocratic (and other hierarchical) modes of organization usually entail an extreme division of labor within the group. In the absence of within-group feedback, the group development process may never evolve beyond the most rudimentary levels.

By contrast, 9.70 has long been based on the intentional and self-conscious implementation of an explicitly *collaborative* learning process (This is also true in 9.68 - albeit in different ways and to differing extents). The collaborative learning system that we aspire to implement here seeks to facilitate the emergence at all levels of its organization and development a genuine spirit of cooperation, coordination and a shared commitment to generally applicable and commonly understood procedures and mores.

"Open systems", are known to increase the likelihood of mutual support (both practical and moral) and enhance the quality of group and individual performance.

If you think this is an annoyingly nebulous concept, simply compare it to your own experience. For example, try to picture yourself at the point of entry into a conventionally arranged classroom on the first day of classes at the start of (another) new term at the school where you are presently an undergraduate.

What are you thinking and feeling?

What are you doing here?

What are your hopes, fears, expectations, assumptions, apprehensions?

Reflect on the influences exerted upon you -- for better or worse -- by the "social architecture" (what's this?) of the place when you first come in to it.

Consider the effect it would have on the quality of your own performance if you were required to work with a colleague or colleagues whose behavior strikes you as unduly self-opinionated, cantankerous, loud-mouthed, etc.

Then contrast that to the effect on the quality of your performance when you are able to work with friendly, open, helpful associates).

Why Groups?

Groups are unavoidable in this world. When/if you find yourself actually to be living or working in one, in some real world situation or context, it may be helpful to know how to think about your predicament in scientifically informed, ethically appropriate and practically effective terms. Our study thus focuses on the play of "social influences" in everyday "situations" "contexts" and "social architectures." (This terminology is important.)

In sum, our aim here is to help you to learn how to facilitate the organization and development of conceptually credible, pedagogically sound and materially effective learning systems; groupings -- large and small -- that engender and sustain collaboration among diverse talents. Our further hope and expectation is that you will find ways of using what you learn here in other contexts where you and your co-participants aspire to achieve sustainable, creative and innovative solutions to a wide range of timely and demanding real world human/ecological problems.

Indeed, in cases where there is no well-established approach/procedure, the wider skill and knowledge sets available in a well-working collaborative group give it an edge over the best-intended efforts of the brightest, most highly motivated and hardest working collection of single individuals.

This is particularly true of groups that operate as self managing units, or are attempting to do so. Here the range of knowledge and skills provided by a diverse cohort of randomly assigned members and the use of a self monitoring group process (formative and summative evaluation on overlapping and alternating and interpenetrating levels and in terms of comparably numerous interacting aspects) makes it a "real" as well as a reasonably safe learning context in which student power and responsibility are taken seriously and are equitably shared in an authentic, consensually valid and systematic effort to address meaningful human/ecological problems.

Even where a problem could be solved by a single person, there are three main benefits to be gained by involving more people – including those who will have to act on or be impacted by the decision. Firstly, the motivational aspect of participating in the decision will clearly enhance the acceptability of outcomes and implementations (this enhancement is sometimes referred to as “buy-in”). Secondly, there may well be factors that all or some of the most directly affected persons and parties understand better than does any single “outside” expert (or collection of experts). Thirdly, questions raised and conclusions arrived in a collaborative, hands-on, empirical way, using objective, publicly-observable methods of procedure, enjoy the advantage that tends to accrue to scientific discourse. The authenticity of this approach lies in the fact that the knowledge making process as a whole is recognizably both authoritative and perpetually self-correcting.

Thus it happens that even the most elevated leaders of some highly hierarchical systems, such as multinational corporations, have discovered that it is useful to the corporate “bottom line” to promote increased involvement in group decision making by lower echelons of the workforce. This increased “buy-in” to organizational objectives supposedly engenders improved work practices and gives people a sense of being able to work together to solve not only work-related problems but human social problems in general. Workers – at any level – who feel themselves empowered can be better trusted to become safe and effective executors of delegated authority, as exemplified in the celebrated right of Japanese car workers to halt the production line.

From the individual's point of view, belonging to a group makes it possible to participate in achievements well beyond his/her own individual potential. The possibility of creating groups in which an individual's own self-perceived level of responsibility and authority is enhanced, and accountability is shared makes it possible, in turn, for teachers and students in classrooms to provide themselves with learning environments conducive to improved performance and enhanced self-esteem coupled with lowered stress. (It seems pertinent to add that the history of the development of our collaborative learning system approach attests that some amazingly creative achievements are attainable when the mental and behavioral resources present in a single MIT classroom are effectively mobilized.)

Group Development

As already noted, one way of viewing the developmental cycle that groups normally go through is in terms of phases or stages. Elsewhere we will consider a more complex and detailed conception involving additional variables and stages, but, for introductory purposes, the following four stages of group development can be taken as typical of 9.70 study groups and other comparable human social systems.

- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing

Forming is the stage when the group first comes together. The experience of prospective members is likely to engender attitudes and “default assumptions” marked at this point by considerable uncertainty, ambivalence and unease and possibly some frank approach-avoidance conflict. (“Do I really belong here?” “Is this a class (group situation, team, living arrangement) from which I can get what I need for myself?”)

In face to face contacts at the outset, everybody tends to be very respectful, wary, well-mannered, eager to please, polite, and rather dull. Interpersonal diversity within the group is noticed by all but few if any socially significant references to differences are openly voiced.

When and if dissatisfaction is expressed, it is often aimed at other individuals or third parties, the tone is usually extremely personal, highly emotionally charged, and generally disparaging. (“This is all a bunch of crap!” “The professors are assholes.” “Those other study groups suck!”)

Since the grouping is new, the individual potential participants are understandably guarded in openly expressing their own personal opinions and may generally be expected to be reserved in accepting the official party line as real or the remarks of others as genuine. This may or may not be particularly so for members who feel apprehensive or are accustomed to playing more subordinate roles.

Unless these and other unspoken concerns are addressed at the outset, at least some participants may have difficulty feeling fully able to “fit in” and may therefore be handicapped in their efforts to contribute effectively.

Amid the silence of the silent majority, the group tends to defer to the “leadership” of the more outspoken minority whose members thus initially emerge as “leaders.”

However, as we shall soon see, sustainable group leadership is a more complicated business than this. Indeed, one of our aims here is to get you to see leadership not as a personal attribute or prerogative of certain presumably “gifted” persons who are perceived as “natural” leaders, but rather as an essential group function: an aspect of the group process itself.

Why does this matter? The realization that leadership need not reside in or remain rigidly identified with a particular person or group of persons, not only allows it to be seen as a critically important and valuable group attribute or feature, but also suggests or implies that the function can and should be encouraged to move around from person to person within the group. From moment to moment and from context to context, as the demand characteristics of the situation change, leadership regarding the presenting task, context, or situation should likewise be able to move to wherever the best ideas happen to be at the moment

Storming is the next stage, After a modicum of commitment all around has been attained, everyone begins to wonder about “What is really going on?” “Who is really in charge here?” and “What will happen next?” Amid uncertainty and a lack of rules or precedents, more or less explicitly fractious struggles over power and control are likely to break out and the boundaries of permissible behavior tend to get tested. (As, of course, they must). Factions form, personalities clash, self-esteem and ego-strength is tested, antagonistic positions are taken, contentious attitudes are assumed, and almost no

one concedes a point without first fighting tooth and nail to defend it. Most importantly, with everyone talking at once, and nobody listening very closely, there is a lot of noise, but very little real or meaningful task-oriented or process-relevant communication is going on.

Confusion and conflict increases between some individuals, while others remain silent. Some who are still (indeed, increasingly) unwilling to talk openly, are feeling frustrated, angry, "bored," disappointed and alienated.

True, this image of the prototypical human group in formation as a virtual battlefield is a little extreme. But if you consider what is going on in some of the groups to which you belong – and if you look beneath the veil of civility – you are likely to see that its no mere bus ride: quite a bit of strongly-felt resentment, cynicism, sarcasm, invective and innuendo is expressed. Is it worth considering the hypothesis that much of the vehemence (and violence?) that attends our personal and social lives at all levels of organization reflects our failure to take properly to heart some of the basic lessons that decades of action research in the area of group dynamics have taught us (e.g. about taking the other person's perspective properly into account)?

Norming. At this stage group members (and subgroups) at least tacitly begin to accept the premise that the situation as defined is "real" and "we're all in the same boat." It becomes plausible to think that they and their classmates/groupmates may actually be in a position to learn something true and useful by working more effectively together. The in-fighting subsides and a new spirit of co-operation becomes evident. Ideally, all members – including those formerly silent -- now begin to feel less shy and more secure enough to forthrightly express their own view points. This increase in the level of participation is further reinforced as formerly unexpressed issues begin to be discussed openly within the group. The most significant improvements at this stage are usually due to the fact that more people are "**trusting the process**" --letting down their own former defenses a bit and starting to listen to and hear what their peers are saying. More efficient work methods become established, regular tasks are performed in an increasingly routine manner, and the complementarity of contributions of different group members begins to be explicitly recognized and valued by the group as a whole.

And finally: **Performing.** This is the culmination. Ideally, the group has settled on a mode of operation that allows free and frank exchange of views, encourages initiative, and manifests a high degree of mutual support within the group, respect for each other and confidence in the quality of consensual agreement.

In terms of performance quality across the lifecycle, many observers agree that groups normally start out at a productivity level that is slightly below the sum of the individuals' levels and then drops abruptly to a nadir (during the storming) only to climb to higher levels during Norming. Levels when Performing may thus turn out to be well above the start. As already intimated, **this elevated level of performance is the main justification for using a collaborative group learning process rather than a simple top-down method of directing a staff.**

Group Skills

As already noted, the group process is comprehensible as involving a series of changes in which a loose collection of otherwise unrelated individuals may become a cohesive and effective operating unit. A main working hypothesis underlying this work (and an aspect of the “value added” that this class provides) is that if the group development process is understood, it can be more effectively facilitated and steered.

There are two main sets of skills which a group (and its members) must acquire:

- Managerial Skills
- Interpersonal Skills

Effective facilitation of the group development process is largely a matter of accelerating the acquisition of these skills by all members. To be more precise, the imperatives of group development require decisions to be made about priorities and procedural issues (e.g. whether to continue moving in the same direction, to speed up, to slow down, to change direction, etc.)

In a collaborative learning system without a designated leader, there are four key leadership roles that must be played by the members if they truly aspire to manage the trajectory and pace of the development process. For shorthand purposes, the roles may be designated as “moving,” “opposing,” “following” (going along; co-moving; co-opposing) and “bystanding” (observing/interpreting what is going on and providing relevant feedback on individual and group performance).

As a self-managing unit, a “leaderless” group needs its members perform collectively the functions otherwise reserved to a designated Group Leader. After all, meetings must be organized, goals defined, resources identified, obstacles anticipated, strategic and tactical planning undertaken, performance monitored, evaluations scheduled and performed, etc. One pitfall to guard against is an overly rigid division of labor. It is a notable tendency of study groups – having initially organized themselves in a reasonably amicable way -- to fall habitually into a *modus operandi* in which the same individual(s) consistently get(s) stuck playing the same role(s), and in which meetings become increasingly banal and routine.

Ideally all tasks will be appropriately rotated; Members will also make it their business to play each of the aforementioned roles as appropriate. (“leader,” “opposer,” “follower” or “bystander”). The “trick” is to learn to be aware of your attitude or “posture” regarding the proceedings and to be able to shift more or less self-consciously from one role to another in contextually-appropriate ways and in accordance with changing circumstances, demand characteristics and definitions of the situation. (Here again, the technical terminology is important. Understanding and being able to use these terms appropriate should be a goal.)

Just as it is foolish to expect a single individual to suddenly assume complete managerial responsibility without assistance, so, group cohesiveness is difficult to engender and maintain – especially when there are many self-styled managers (leaders followers, opposers, bystanders) in the group. Avoid falling habitually into your more well-accustomed and comfortable role(s). In order to be sustainable, the group as a whole must be internally both unified and diverse; members must

come up with and agree to go along with an appropriate method of ensuring that all key roles get played and all key tasks get done by all members as required.

As a collection of people responsible for their own respective and conjoint performance, a working group – in order to be successful -- needs to relearn some basic manners and people-management skills. Shyness – if present -- needs to be acknowledged as a problem and somehow overcome. Self-opinionated, cantankerous, destructive, loud-mouth behavior must give way to less destructive modes of interaction.

Facilitating Development

In a collaborative learning system, leadership is an essential function not to be confused with an individual attribute. Responsibility for facilitation thus must needs be equitably shared and performance formatively evaluated by every member equally and recurrently.

It is common practice in many situations to appoint, or otherwise identify someone to serve – at least temporarily -- as the "group facilitator". The role of this person is to continually “bystand” by drawing attention to group process issues and to and “co-lead” by suggesting ways and means of supporting and enhancing the group’s repertoire of knowledge and skills. In this class, we, the instructors, start out by playing this leadership role big time. Please understand: this is merely our short-term strategy. Indeed, the existence of a single identified facilitator (or group of facilitators) tends to encourage others to become less proactive and more dependent and deferential, thus retarding the group’s readiness, willingness and ability to assume collective responsibility for its own development. If this sharing of power and responsibility is recognized and respected and everyone comes to accept it as normal, necessary and just, then the duration and disruptiveness of the Storming phase may be minimized.

The following set of suggestions may help in group formation.

Focus

As already indicated, the two basic foci should be the group *process* and the *task*. If something is to be decided, it is the group that decides it. If there is a problem, the group defines and addresses it. If the quality and/or amount of participation of a group member is found wanting, the group has the power and responsibility to point it out and ask for change. If inter-individual conflicts arise, their existence should be acknowledged and the issues should be discussed in terms of the task and the process and in the light of prior agreements. If there is initially a lack of structure and purpose in the deliberations, this lack should be considered in terms of both foci. Likewise if there are disputes between proponents of alternative courses of action.

Clarification

In any learning situation, clarity of communication and coherence of demand characteristics is of paramount importance. It is the first responsibility of the group to clarify its own task, and to record this understanding so that it can be constantly viewed in the light of group performance. This means

having, in fact, or in effect, a *mission statement* which may be revised or replaced, but is always available for review/updating and validation as a focus for the groups deliberations and actions.

The “mouse” and the “loudmouth” roles.

In any group, the silence of those who are inclined to remain silent and the talkativeness of those who tend to do all the talking are systematically interrelated. “Shy people” who tend not to say much often turn out to be an under utilized resource for the whole group. By explicitly encouraging active participation by all, the group reaps the best return for minimal effort. It is the responsibility of “shy people” to speak out and to contribute. It is the responsibility of the group to encourage everyone to develop his or her own capacity for leadership by including him/her in the discussion and actions, and to provide positive reinforcement each time that happens. Not uncommonly, there may be a member or members who get disproportionate amounts of “air time” and whose opinions disproportionately dominate the discussion. It is the responsibility of each individual to consider whether s/he is behaving in such a way. It is the responsibility of the group to help maintain a balanced discussion – to ask excessively talkative members to summarize briefly, and to make room for the expression of other views.

The written record

Often a decision that is made but not recorded will become clouded and have to be re-discussed. This can be avoided simply by recording on a large display (where the group can clearly see) each point of agreement as it is arrived at and each decision as it is made. This has the further advantage of encouraging the group to summarize its main points of agreement and its main substantive or procedural decisions in a clear and concise form.

Feedback (negative)

Negative feedback is essential for learning. Be prepared to stumble and fall occasionally. All criticism should be neutral: focused on the task or group process and not on alleged mental or behavioral shortcomings or personality defects of particular people. People who err are not necessarily stupid people. So, rather than calling Johnnie an innumerate moron, point out the error and offer him a calculator. It is wise to adopt the policy of giving negative feedback frequently, gently, and in a timely way -- especially for small things - this can be couched as mutual coaching, and it reduces the destructive impact of criticism when things go badly wrong. Insofar as possible, every criticism should be preceded by something positive and accompanied by a constructive suggestion for improvement. By the same token, those who make suggestions for or against certain courses of action ought to be ready willing and able to participate in the implementation of their own proposals.

Feedback (positive)

If anyone does something well, praise it. If someone says something that you agree with, let it be known. Not only does this reinforce commendable actions, but it also mollifies the negative feedback which may come later. Statements or other actions that produce learning, build consensus, or enhance progress toward shared goals (e.g. task orientation and/or group process facilitation) should be validated.

Handling setbacks and failures

The long term success of a group depends upon how it deals with moments of failure. It is a very common tendency to brush off lapses or set-backs and to get on with the next business at hand with no more than the briefest and most perfunctory discussion of "what went wrong". In terms of group development, this tends to be a counterproductive tendency. Performance failures are learning opportunities. Shortcomings should be acknowledged and the reasons for them explored by the group. This is done not to find fault or to assign blame (for that is shared by the whole group), but rather to examine the causes and to devise alternative approaches intended to prevent or avoid repetition. A given mistake should only happen once if it is treated correctly. The group may decide to delegate implementation of the agreed-upon alternative approach to the individual or sub-group that was responsible for making the original error. This allows the group to demonstrate its continuing trust in its members and enables the offender(s) to make amends.

Dealing with deadlocks

If two opposing points of view are persistently held in the group then an impasse looms and some action must be taken. Several possible strategies exist. Each sub-group could be asked to articulate the other sub-group's viewpoint in order to better understand it. A search for common ground should be emphasized, and the differences viewed as an opportunity to search out a possible middle way or an alternative strategy that might bring about a reconciliation. Each position should be evaluated in the light of the group's central mission or task. But firstly the group should decide how much time the issue actually merits and then stop the discussion promptly after that time. Then, if the issue is still unresolved and not of absolutely critical importance, consider settling the argument with a coin-toss.

Sign posting

As each small point is discussed, the larger picture can be obscured. Thus it is sometimes useful for the group to remind itself: this is where we are, that is where we came from, and this is where we should be going.

Avoiding single solutions

Just as nominal leaders do not have all the answers, so first ideas are not always best. For any given problem, the group should generate alternatives, evaluate these in terms of the task, pick one and implement it. But most importantly, they must also monitor the outcome, schedule a review and be prepared to change the plan in accordance with observed outcomes. (This is formative evaluation, all over again).

Sustaining active communication

Meaningful communication is the conjoint responsibility of both the speaker and the listener. The speaker must acknowledge that s/he has a point of view and should actively endeavor to express her/himself in a clear and concise manner. The listener must likewise recognize the influence of perspectival factors on his/her perception of what is being said, to actively seek to understand it and ask for repetition or clarification if unsure. Finally, both parties must be sure that the ideas have been

correctly communicated. It is sometimes wise to test understanding by having the listener summarize in his/her own words what has been said.

Conclusion

Groups are like relationships. They can be extremely satisfying and rewarding, but only if you put quality time, energy and effort into them in order to make them work.

In the classroom and the work place, groups constitute important units of organizational and productive activity whose dynamic nature and creative value are coming to be increasingly understood. By making the group itself responsible for its own performance, the shared power and responsibility of the members becomes an accelerator for the group development process.

In order for the process of its own development to be recognized and explicitly dealt with by the group, time and resources must regularly be allocated to discussing these issues. GOOD LUCK!

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