

STREAM: Social Networks

TITLE: Leadership Competence: A Socially Networked Process

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Abstract

No matter how strong their academic aptitude, no matter how supportive their family home, no matter how extensive their formal education, no business leader starts his or her career fully competent to lead a business corporation: they have a lot to learn. Earlier studies have shown that business leaders learn from experience, that they do so in often accidental and ad-hoc ways, that this required self-directed enquiry and reflection that ultimately led to sense-making within a particular social context, and that overcoming challenges and difficulties at work often trigger their self-generative learning capacities. Many studies in the management discipline have focused either on what it takes to be a business leader (normative) or what business leaders do (empirical), but little is known about the development of business leadership competence. This paper proposes that highly accomplished business leaders encounter specific 'formative events' throughout their career that play a central role in the development of their social identities, and their capacities to deal with change. Business leadership is all about dealing with change, and this provides opportunities for self-discovery, social learning and enables learning-to-learn agility. 'Groundedness' and 'adaptability' together are the secrets to business leadership success. These two qualities are characteristic of the outlook of all great business leaders, and are acquired during critical, perspective-changing incidents, often accompanying significant change, throughout their lives. This paper explores the conceptual roots of these concepts and shows that the life-stories of highly accomplished business leaders attest to them on every page.

Keywords

Formative events; learning outlook; identity; groundedness; adaptability; leadership competence

Conceptual Foundations

This paper focuses on leaders of business organizations. It explores how they develop their distinctive competence. Many studies in the management discipline have focused either on what it takes to be a business leader (normative) or what business leaders do (empirical), but little is known about the development of business leadership competence. This paper proposes that business leadership competence results from the development of personal perspective (identity) and the capacity to deal with change (learning outlook).

Business Organizations & Change

The business context poses specific challenges that determine which distinctive competencies are required for business leadership. The nature of the business context can be described as: a competitive arena characterised by continuous change. Business organizations have to understand and deal with the economic cycle of growth and recession, and respond to far reaching change brought by technological development and shifts in consumer demands. Knowledge and the need to continuously renew and update it, defines the nature of competition in the business arena.

Adaptation to change is essential. Arie De Geus (1997), in: 'The Living Company', and Collins & Porras (1994) in: 'Built to last', found that the sustainability and long-term success of business organizations depends on their ability to adapt to changes in their environment. Organizations that fail to change with the times inevitably decline and are swept aside. A major challenge facing business organizations is responding effectively to change. In: 'Breaking the Code of Change', Beer & Nohria (2000) explore how this can be done.

In short, knowledge-based competition and continuous change are distinctive aspects of the business context.

Business Leadership

The distinctive nature of the business context (knowledge-based competition and ongoing change) puts specific requirements on the leadership of business organizations.

Earlier studies have found that business leaders play a vital role in transforming their organizations to adapt to change. They take primarily responsibility for understanding market situations, formulating goals, developing strategy and supporting organizational change processes. They help establish a vision of what the corporate future will be and encourage movement towards it. This requires taking action, being persistent, anticipating change, adapting to it, remaining flexible, and continuous learning.

The roles and activities of leaders in business organizations have been explored as early as 1951 in a normative study by Melvin Copeland in: 'The Executive at Work', and have more recently been extensively documented in empirical studies by John Kotter (1996 / 1999) in: 'What Leaders Really Do' and in: 'Leading Change'.

In short, the distinctive competence of business leaders is to understand change and be able to transform their organizations to adapt to it.

Leadership & Learning

Understanding how business leaders acquire or develop the competence to lead business organizations (understand change and help organizations to adapt to it), requires consideration of the fundamental debate in the leadership field about nature versus nurture.

Cyril Levicki (2002) in: 'Developing Leadership Genius' has explored the general proposition that at least some personal characteristics are either part of their genetic predisposition or primarily the product of early childhood experience. Levicki concedes that many studies attempting to predict leadership competence based on personal traits, cognitive abilities and early life experiences have remained inconclusive. The conclusion of this study is that we cannot discount the importance of the life-long lessons of experience accrued throughout a leader's career. The way that they respond to critical events in their life, has significant bearing on their competence as leaders. To become competent leaders, they have a lot to learn, which requires the development of an effective outlook on learning. This imperative has also been described by McCall, Lombardo & Morrison (1988) in: 'The Lessons of Experience'.

Recent longitudinal research that explores and describes the significance of learning for business leadership and organizational change has been presented by Jim Harris (2001) in: 'The Learning Paradox' and Goldsmith et al. (2000) in: 'Learning Journeys'. This line of enquiry builds on research done by Peter Senge (1999) in: 'The Dance of Change', about the relation between dealing with change (which is seen here as the essence of business leadership) and learning.

In short, developing business leadership competence requires experiential learning.

The essence of the argument presented in the previous paragraphs can be summarized as follows: the business context is characterized by change. Business leadership in essence is dealing with change. Dealing with change requires learning. Thus developing business leadership competence requires learning to learn. The recent study of Tinelli (2000) in: 'Leaders And Their Learnings' provides strong conceptual support for this line of argument.

Learning Logs

Unfortunately it is not possible to interview many of the great business leaders of the past decades as a number of them are no longer with us. However, many prominent business leaders have written autobiographies that can help reveal much about their learning, as they looked back on their careers.

Example of these texts include: Katharine Graham (1997) 'Personal History', Conrad Hilton (1957) 'Be My Guest', Sam Walton (1992) 'Made in America', and David Ogilvy (1997) 'An Autobiography'. It is these unique and relatively untapped life narratives that provide the primary data for this paper.

Autobiographies can be viewed as 'learning logs'. Goldsmith (2000) in: 'Learning Journeys' explores the thesis that great leaders are great learners and underscores the significance of understanding their learning perspectives and behavior through direct observation and analysis of 1st hand data. Memoirs provide a wealth of information about the thinking of their protagonists concerning events that they view as 'critical incidents'. This study focuses specifically on evidence of the learning outlook of accomplished business leaders, shaped by critical incidents throughout their career, as described in their life narratives.

Recently there has been renewed interest in biographical methods in the Social Sciences. Several scholars have developed innovative research designs and techniques for the structured analysis of narratives. Particularly applicable for this paper are the methods described by Smith & Watson (2001) in: 'Reading Autobiography', Bjorklund (1998) in: 'Interpreting the Self' and Barros (1998) in: 'Autobiography: narrative of transformation'. These methods include Narrative Analysis for data reduction and Clustering for the development of constructs.

Critical incidents

Much of the literature on adult learning recognizes that explicit learning happens in reaction to 'discontinuities' or critical events. Greiner (1972) in: 'Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow', found that managers learn new behaviors and learn to think in radically different ways as a result of managing developmental 'crisis' within their organizations, which cause permanent change both for the individual and for the business.

Cope & Watts (2000) in: 'Learning by Doing: an exploration of experience, critical incidents and reflection in entrepreneurial learning', studied the parallel processes of personal learning & development and organizational change. They focused primarily on the role of critical incidents, within the wider process of entrepreneurial learning. Cope & Watts found that these events had significant influence on the individuals, particularly in terms of their personal learning and self-awareness. They argue that: "*although the incidents tended to be perceived as negative in terms of their immediate impact, the developmental outcomes (learning effects) were often very positive*" and "*it becomes evident that they were powerful events in the histories of the businesses and stimulated fundamental and transformational learning for the entrepreneurs concerned*" (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 113 - 114).

Cheetham & Chivers (2001) describe mind-set changes and 'Damascus Road' experiences, and argue that: "*...the development of professional competence is largely a gradual and iterative process. It is a process that typically contains a number of surges, triggered by certain particularly formative experiences, but which appear to be basically incremental in nature. However, some respondents were able to point to a single event, which had utterly transformed them in some important way. This may have been something that had changed their professional philosophy, given them a new way of seeing the world, improved their self-knowledge, boosted their inner confidence, or provided a new level of professional motivation. A number of such 'watershed' experiences were related...*" (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001, p. 11).

Crucibles of Leadership

Recently, further evidence of the central role of critical incidents in how business leaders learn has been presented by Bennis & Thomas (2002, a) in: 'Crucibles of Leadership', and (2002, b) in: 'Geeks & Geezers, how era, values, and defining moments shape leaders'. They found that the essentials of leadership remain constant across generations of leaders. Furthermore, Bennis & Thomas discovered that every respondent in their sample of 43 business executives, regardless of age, had undergone at least one unplanned, intense, transformational experience: what Bennis & Thomas call a 'crucible'. These 'defining moments' provided key lessons for their personal and career development and became the sources of their distinctive leadership competence.

Bennis notes that: "*the crucible experience was a trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forced them to question who they were and what mattered to them. It required them to examine their values, question their assumptions, hone their judgment. And, invariably they emerged from the crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their*

purpose – changed in some fundamental way” and that “whatever the crucible’s nature, the leader was able to create a narrative around it, a story of how he was challenged, met the challenge, and became a better leader.” (Bennis, 2002, a, p. 4).

Next to describing how ‘crucible’ events help a person to become a leader, Bennis & Thomas (2002, b) identified four essential qualities that allow the effective practice of business leadership. These are: an ‘adaptive capacity’ that lets people not only survive inevitable setbacks and difficulties but also learn from them; an ability to engage others through shared meaning or a common vision; a distinctive and compelling voice that communicates one’s conviction and desire to do the right thing; and a sense of integrity that allows a leader to distinguish between good and evil. In addition to these qualities, Bennis & Thomas identified one critical trait that all the leaders shared: *“Unlike those defeated by time and age, our ‘geezers’ have remained just like our ‘geeks’ – open, willing to take risks, hungry for knowledge and experience, courageous, and eager to see what the new day brings”* (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, b, p. 180). In short, they had developed an effective learning outlook and remained keen to learn.

The study of Bennis & Thomas (2002, b) revolves around the concept of adaptive capacity. Their argument is summarized as follows: *“people with ample adaptive capacity may struggle in the crucibles they encounter, but they don’t become stuck in or defined by them. They learn important lessons, including new skills that allow them to move on to new levels of achievement and new levels of learning. This ongoing process of challenge, adaptation, and learning prepares the individual for the next crucible, where the process is repeated.”* (Bennis, 2002, b, p. 93).

These, and further recent studies in the field of Reflective Practitioners focus on two aspects that are of particular interest to this paper. Firstly, these authors point to the role of critical incidents or ‘crucible moments’ that leaders encounter throughout their career. Additionally these studies suggest that the person’s learning ‘mindset’ determines whether (s)he develops his/her business leadership competence.

This paper aims to identify, describe and analyze critical incidents (formative events) and the perspective changing effects that result from them, which affect the development of business leadership competence. For this the focus now turns to an empirical analysis of a sample of autobiographies of highly accomplished business leaders:

Empirical Study

Selected Case Studies

The information presented in this paper is drawn from 25 case studies, each based on the autobiography of a highly accomplished business leader. The cases are selected to represent specific social networks and contexts. While perfect homogeneity has proven to be an illusive concept in social scientific research, this paper brings together a small sample of 5 business leaders from one industry: Fast Food, who all share a number of additional characteristics: they are all American, men, who founded their fast food business in the late 50's / early 60's, enjoyed little education, and came from a poor socio-economic background. To this relatively homogenous sample, 20 more case studies are added, which each introduce further diversity (of education, industry, economic status, time-period, country and gender) to the sample.

| Leader | Company | Education | Industry | Economic Status | Time Period | Country | Gender |
|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------|-------------|------------|--------|
| Truett Cathy | Chick-fil-A | Low | Fast Food | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| Ray Kroc | McDonalds | Low | Fast Food | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| Tom Monaghan | Domino's Pizza | Low | Fast Food | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| William Rosenberg | Dunkin' Donuts | Low | Fast Food | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| Harland Sanders | KFC | Low | Fast Food | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| James McLamore | Burger King | College | Fast Food | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| Lee Iacocca | Ford / Chrysler | | Automobile | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| Sam Walton | Wall-Mart | | Retail | Not well-off | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| David Packard | Hewlett Packard | | | Average wealth | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| An Wang | Wang Labs | | | Average wealth | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| David Rockefeller | Chase Bank | | | Rich | 50s 60s | USA | Male |
| Conrad Hilton | Hilton Hotels | | | | Earlier | USA | Male |
| Alfred Sloan | General Motors | | | | Earlier | USA | Male |
| Tom Ashbrook | HomePortfolio.com | | | | Recent | USA | Male |
| Jack Welch | General Electric | | | | Recent | USA | Male |
| Richard Branson | Virgin Group | | | | | UK | Male |
| James Dyson | Dyson | | | | | UK | Male |
| David Ogilvy | Ogilvy & Mather | | | | | UK | Male |
| Akio Morita | Sony | | | | | Japan | Male |
| Ricardo Semler | Semco | | | | | Brazil | Male |
| Muhammad Yunus | Grameen Bank | | | | | Bangladesh | Male |
| Katharine Graham | Washington Post | | | | | | Female |
| Marcia Israel-Curly | Judy's | | | | | | Female |
| Sandra Kurtzig | ASK Computer | | | | | | Female |
| Anita Roddick | The Body Shop | | | | | | Female |

Table 1: Selected Case Studies

Table 1 provides an overview of the case studies selected and the social networks, time periods and contexts that they represent. While most business leaders / company names will be familiar to a general business audience, it may be informative to note that Wang is an electronics firm, HomePortfolio.com is an internet home furnishings company, Dyson makes vacuum cleaners, Ogilvy & Mather is an advertising agency, Semco is a Brazilian heavy equipment manufacturer, Grameen Bank offers micro-credit to the poor in developing countries, and ASK Computer produces operations software for manufacturing companies.

The availability of autobiographies of highly accomplished business leaders from such diverse constituencies already provides an indication of the limited significance of ‘pedigree’ and an incentive to delve deeper into the actual experiences of business leaders and the perspectives that arise from them. These experiences include ‘formative events’ that have a bearing on the development of their identity (personal outlook) and affect their capacity to deal with change (learning outlook). This paper contends that therein lies the secret of their success as business leaders.

Background

A first aspect that warrants closer scrutiny is the personal background of these highly accomplished business leaders. Table 2 provides an overview of their date and place of birth, the time period of their youth, their parents socio-economic status and their father’s occupation.

| Author | Birth date | Birth place | Period youth | Parents wealth | Wealth index | Father’s occupation |
|----------------------|------------|------------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|--|
| Truett Cathy | 1921 | Eatonton, Georgia, USA | 1921-1939 | Not well off | 1 | Farmer / Insurance sales |
| Ray Kroc | 05-10-1902 | Oak Park, Illinois, USA | 1902-1920 | Not well off | 1 | Western Union employee |
| Tom Monaghan | 25-03-1937 | Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA | 1937-1955 | Not well off | 1 | Farmer / Factory worker |
| William Rosenberg | 10-06-1916 | Boston, Massachusetts, USA | 1916-1934 | Not well off | 1 | Grocer |
| Harland Sanders | 09-09-1890 | Henryville, Indiana, USA | 1890-1908 | Not well off | 1 | Farmer |
| Jim McLamore | 30-05-1926 | New York City, USA | 1926-1944 | Not well off | 1 | Textile |
| Lee Iacocca | 15-10-1924 | Allentown, Pennsylvania, USA | 1924-1942 | Not well off | 1 | Restaurant owner / Car Rental business |
| Sam Walton | 29-03-1918 | Kingfisher, Oklahoma, USA | 1918-1936 | Not well off | 1 | Insurance salesman |
| David Packard | 07-09-1912 | Pueblo, Colorado, USA | 1912-1930 | Average | 2 | Lawyer |
| An Wang | 07-02-1920 | Shanghai, China | 1920-1938 | Average | 2 | English language teacher |
| David Rockefeller | 12-06-1915 | New York City, USA | 1915-1933 | Wealthy | 3 | Investor |
| Conrad Hilton | 25-12-1887 | San Antonio, New Mexico, USA | 1887-1905 | Not well off | 1 | Merchant |
| Alfred Sloan | 23-05-1875 | New Haven, Connecticut, USA | 1875-1893 | Average | 2 | Grocer |
| Tom Ashbrook | 1956 | Bloomington, Illinois, USA | 1956-1974 | Wealthy | 3 | Farmer |
| Jack Welch | 19-11-1935 | Peabody, Massachusetts, USA | 1935-1953 | Not well off | 1 | Train conductor |
| Richard Branson | 1950 | Shamley Green, Surrey, UK | 1950-1968 | Average | 2 | Lawyer |
| James Dyson | 02-05-1947 | Norfolk, UK | 1947-1965 | Average | 2 | Classical language teacher |
| David Ogilvy | 23-06-1911 | West Horsley, Surrey, UK | 1911-1929 | Wealthy | 3 | Stock broker |
| Akio Morita | 26-01-1920 | Nagoya, Japan | 1920-1938 | Wealthy | 3 | Brewer |
| Ricardo Semler | 1959 | Sao Paulo, Brazil | 1959-1977 | Wealthy | 3 | Industrialist |
| Muhammad Yunus | 1940 | Chittagong, Bangladesh | 1940-1958 | Average | 2 | Jeweler |
| Katharine Graham | 16-06-1917 | Mount Kisco, New York, USA | 1917-1935 | Wealthy | 3 | Publisher |
| Marcia Israel-Curley | 1926 | Cochecton, New York, USA | 1926-1944 | Not well off | 1 | Farmer |
| Sandra Kurtzig | 21-10-1946 | Chicago, USA | 1946-1964 | Wealthy | 3 | Real Estate agent |
| Anita Roddick | 1942 | Sussex, UK | 1942-1960 | Average | 2 | Restaurant owner |

Table 2: Background

Several patterns of interest to the research question pursued in this paper emerge: while the sample of case studies selected here cannot be taken to represent the entire population of all highly accomplished business leaders, it does show that there are a significant number of cases where these leaders come from socio-economic backgrounds that are of average wealth (7 out of 25) or even not well off (11 out of 25, including all Fast Food founders). The wealth index average of the sample is only 1.8 on a scale of 3, or barely average). Their fathers’ occupations reflect this pattern with 3 of the Fast Food founders’ fathers having been farmers (5 overall), as well as 2 grocers, 2 language teachers and 2 restaurant holders: in most societies occupations not often held by the socio-economic elite. This justifies the conclusion that a socially privileged background (pedigree) is not a dominant factor determining their ultimate success as business leaders. However, the cases of David

Rockefeller and Katharine Graham, who both grew up in abundant wealth, do provide clear examples that a privileged upbringing can be a stepping stone on the road to business leadership success. As a further aspect of their backgrounds, it is worth noting that a significant number of these leaders lived through the Great Depression period (5 Fast Food founders, 16 overall) and World War II (all 6 Fast Food founders, 21 overall). Subsequent analysis in this paper will discuss the significance of these experiences for the development of identity and adaptability.

Formal Education

The next aspect, central to the nature vs. nurture debate, that warrants explicit attention, is education. Where these highly accomplished business leaders great scholars? Table 3 provides an overview of the highest degree completed, institution and year of graduation, further courses attended, self-reported academic aptitude, extra-curricular activities and influence of inspiring teachers.

| Author | Highest degree completed | Education index | Institution | Graduation year | Further courses | Academic aptitude in school | Inspiring teachers | Extracurricular activities |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|--|-----------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Truett Cathy | High School | 1 | Commercial High, USA | 1939 | Sunday school | Below average | Y | - |
| Ray Kroc | Middle School | 1 | - | 1918 | - | Below average | N | - |
| Tom Monaghan | High School | 1 | St. Thomas High, USA | 1955 | High school business classes | Below average | Y | - |
| William Rosenberg | Middle School | 1 | Whittier Elementary, Dorchester, USA | 1929 | - | Below average | Y | Ballroom dancing |
| Harland Sanders | Primary School | 1 | - | 1902 | - | Below average | Y | - |
| Jim McLamore | College, Hotel Administration | 2 | Cornell, USA | 1947 | - | Average | Y | Class President, Football, basketball, baseball |
| Lee Iacocca | MSc, Engineering | 3 | Lehigh University, Pennsylvania, USA | 1946 | Dale Carnegie public speaking | Above average | N | Several sports |
| Sam Walton | MSc, Business | 3 | University of Missouri, USA | 1940 | IBM computing | Average | N | Quarterback, several activities |
| David Packard | MSc, Electrical Engineering | 3 | Stanford, USA | 1934 | Business Law Accounting, Stanford Fellowship | Above average | Y | Athletics |
| An Wang | PhD, Applied Physics | 4 | Harvard, USA | 1948 | - | Above average | Y | - |
| David Rockefeller | PhD, Economics | 4 | LSE & Chicago | 1940 | IBM computing | Average (dyslexia) | Y | - |
| Conrad Hilton | College | 2 | New Mexico School of Mines, USA | 1904 | - | Average | N | - |
| Alfred Sloan | BSc, Electrical Engineering | 3 | MIT, USA | 1895 | - | Above average | N | - |
| Tom Ashbrook | College | 2 | Yale, USA | 1972 | Nieman Fellowship Harvard | - | Y | - |
| Jack Welch | PhD, Chemical Engineering | 4 | University of Illinois, USA | 1960 | - | Above average | Y | Quarterback, baseball |
| Richard Branson | Grammar school | 1 | Stowe, UK | 1968 | - | Below average (dyslexia) | N | Captain football, rugby, cricket Student magazine |
| James Dyson | University, Design / Engineering | 3 | Royal College of Art, UK | 1967 | - | Below average | Y | Running |
| David Ogilvy | Grammar | 1 | Fettes, Scotland | 1929 | - | Average | N | - |

| | School | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------|---------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Akio Morita | MSc, Physics | 3 | Osaka University, Japan | 1940 | - | Average | Y | Electronics |
| Ricardo Semler | University, Law | 3 | Sao Paulo State, Law School | 1979 | Exec MP Harvard | Below average | N | Captain track team, Class President |
| Muhammad Yunus | PhD, Economics | 4 | Vanderbilt University, USA | 1969 | - | Above average | Y | Scouting |
| Katharine Graham | University, American History | 3 | Chicago, USA | 1938 | ANPA publishing, IBM computer | Average | Y | Captain baseball, hockey, track |
| Marcia Israel-Curley | High School | 1 | Seward Park Public High, USA | 1941 | Book keeping Type writing Comm. law | Above average | N | - |
| Sandra Kurtzig | MSc, Engineering | 3 | Stanford, USA | 1967 | SCMP Harvard | Above average | Y | - |
| Anita Roddick | College, teaching diploma | 2 | Newton Park College of Education, UK | 1962 | - | - | N | - |

Table 3: Formal Education

Of the 5 Fast Food founders only 2 completed High School, 2 had only Middle School and Harland Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken did not attend more than Primary School. Jim McLamore of Burger King studied Hotel Administration in college. Scholars they were not! Overall 8 leaders completed only High School or less, 4 went to college, 9 gained a Masters degree and 4 have a Ph.D. The education index average for the sample is 2.4 on a scale of 4. These numbers don't reflect a consistently high level of education, however, with the exception of the Fast Food founders, most leaders in the sample have evidently enjoyed more formal education than the national average in their respective societies. A look at the names of the schools that they attended also reveals a number of highly reputable educational institutions. This leads to the guarded conclusion that formal education may be a helpful but is not a necessary factor in the development of business leadership competence.

How about 'nature'? It can be assumed that academic aptitude is at least partly determined by genetic pre-disposition. No less than 23 of the 25 leaders in the sample reported on their academic aptitude in 'school'. Of the Fast Food founders, 5 reported a below average aptitude and Jim McLamore of Burger King, who was the only one to attend college, reported an average aptitude. Despite the fact that no less than 15 of the leaders report having encountered inspiring teachers 'in school', and several leaders report strong support from their parents to get an education, a significant majority of all leaders in the sample (also 15) reported an academic aptitude that was average or below. Few saw themselves as gifted scholars, many were keen to leave their formal schooling behind and to start 'learning by doing'.

Life & Career

The limited formal education of the highly accomplished business leaders is reflected in their relatively young age at the start of their working life: two of the Fast Food founders left school at age 14, and Harland Sanders started work at age 12. Overall, the average age at which these leaders started working full-time is only 19. The length of their career covered in their autobiographies spans on average 50 years. The memorable events that they encountered throughout these half centuries in business are set out in considerable detail in an average of 310 pages of text in their personal narratives. Table 4 provides an overview of the basic parameters and some major global events that represent mileposts in their lives & careers.

| Author | Age | Career start age | Career period | Career length | Lived abroad | Extensive travel abroad | Major events reported | Married | Children |
|-------------------|-----|------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------|----------|
| Truett Cathy | 81 | 18 | 1939-2002 | 63 | N | Y | Depression (30s), WWII | Y | Y |
| Ray Kroc | 75 | 14 | 1918-1977 | 61 | N | Y | Depression (30s), WWII | Y | Y |
| Tom Monaghan | 49 | 18 | 1955-1986 | 31 | N | Y | WWII | Y | Y |
| William Rosenberg | 85 | 14 | 1929-2001 | 72 | N | Y | Depression (30s), WWII | Y | Y |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|----|----|-----------|----|---|---|---|---|---|
| Harland Sanders | 84 | 12 | 1902-1974 | 72 | N | Y | Depression (30s), WWII | Y | Y |
| Jim McLamore | 72 | 21 | 1947-1998 | 51 | N | Y | Depression (30s), WWII | Y | Y |
| Lee Iacocca | 60 | 22 | 1946-1984 | 38 | N | Y | Oil crisis (70s) Auto industry crisis (80s) | Y | Y |
| Sam Walton | 74 | 22 | 1940-1992 | 52 | N | Y | WWII | Y | Y |
| David Packard | 83 | 23 | 1935-1995 | 60 | N | Y | WWII, Computer (80s) | Y | Y |
| An Wang | 66 | 20 | 1940-1986 | 46 | Y | Y | WWII | Y | Y |
| David Rockefeller | 87 | 25 | 1940-2002 | 62 | Y | Y | WWII | Y | Y |
| Conrad Hilton | 70 | 17 | 1904-1957 | 53 | N | Y | WWI, Depression (30s), WWII | Y | Y |
| Alfred Sloan | 87 | 19 | 1895-1963 | 68 | N | N | WWI, Depression (30s), WWII | - | - |
| Tom Ashbrook | 44 | 16 | 1972-2000 | 28 | Y | Y | Watergate (70s), Internet (90s) | Y | Y |
| Jack Welch | 65 | 24 | 1960-2001 | 41 | N | Y | - | Y | Y |
| Richard Branson | 48 | 18 | 1968-1998 | 30 | N | Y | Airline crisis (90s) | Y | Y |
| James Dyson | 50 | 20 | 1967-1997 | 30 | N | Y | - | Y | Y |
| David Ogilvy | 67 | 19 | 1930-1978 | 48 | Y | Y | WWII | N | N |
| Akio Morita | 65 | 24 | 1945-1986 | 41 | Y | Y | Transistor (60s), WWII | Y | Y |
| Ricardo Semler | 34 | 16 | 1975-1993 | 18 | N | Y | Economic crisis Brazil (80s) | Y | N |
| Muhammad Yunus | 58 | 21 | 1961-1998 | 37 | Y | Y | Bangladesh War (71), Famine (74) | Y | Y |
| Katharine Graham | 80 | 21 | 1938-1997 | 59 | N | Y | WWII, Watergate (70s) | Y | Y |
| Marcia Israel-Curley | 76 | 15 | 1941-2002 | 61 | N | Y | Depression (30s) | Y | Y |
| Sandra Kurtzig | 45 | 21 | 1967-1991 | 24 | N | N | Computer (80s) | Y | Y |
| Anita Roddick | 58 | 20 | 1962-2000 | 38 | Y | Y | - | Y | Y |

Table 4: Life & Career

Two general aspects indicative of the social networks that these leaders are part concern their family situation and the geographic context in which they have spent their lives. All Fast Food founders in the sample and 22 leaders overall were married and had children. All four women in the sample managed to combine their career in business with their role as mother. While none of the Fast Food founders and 18 of the leaders overall did not report living abroad for any significant amount of time, all Fast Food leaders and 23 leaders overall travelled abroad extensively as their business expanded throughout their career. Almost all leaders mentioned major economic events (Great Depression, Oil Crisis), or social strife (World War) as events that framed periods of their career and life. The pervasiveness of these general themes in their life stories are a first indication that 'change of context' and 'dealing with hardship' may constitute formative events that have significant impact on their personal outlook (identity) and learning outlook (capacity to deal with change).

Central Themes

A next analysis step undertaken in the data reduction process of the personal narratives is to note recurring central themes that are pervasive throughout the texts. This allows the construction of a ranked overview of clusters of themes that are prominent in the life-stories of the highly accomplished business leaders. These themes reveal much about their general outlook. Table 5 provides an overview:

| # | Overall central themes clusters | Ranked frequency |
|---|---|------------------|
| 1 | Persistence (5), hard work (4), determination (2), applying oneself, energy, commitment | 14 |
| 2 | Principle (2), responsibility (2), stewardship (2), envir. consciousness, duty, fitting in, philanthropy, humility, ethics, service | 13 |
| 3 | Experimenting (4), learning by doing (4), overcoming failure (2), turning adversity into advantage, learning from mistakes | 12 |
| 4 | Creativity (3), entrepreneurship (2), seizing opportunities (3), invention, pioneering, improvisation | 11 |
| 5 | Action orientation (3), setting goals (3), taking risks (2), Setting & overcoming challenges, initiative | 10 |
| 6 | Passion (3), dreaming (2), keeping life fresh, living life to the full, fun, freedom | 9 |
| 7 | Innovation (9) | 9 |
| 8 | Common sense (2), facing reality, practical problem solving, listening & questioning, fact-based decision-making, judgment | 7 |

| | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 9 | Confidence (2), self-esteem, optimism, overcoming shortcomings, force of personality, intuition | 7 |
| 10 | Trust (2), networking, teamwork, empowerment, human potential | 6 |
| 11 | Striving for improvement (2), going the extra mile, exceeding expectations, excellence, quality, | 6 |
| 12 | Faith (4), Confucianism, spirituality | 6 |
| 13 | Breaking convention (4), anti-establishment | 5 |
| 14 | Change (2), adapting to change (2) | 4 |
| 15 | Competing (3), differentiation | 4 |
| 16 | Sharing ideas (2), teaching | 3 |
| 17 | Design (3) | 3 |
| 18 | Technical competence, professional management | 2 |
| Rest | Appreciation for art & history, sharing | 2 |
| | | 133 |

Table 5: Central Themes

The themes uncovered in Table 5 confirm the proposition put forward by Carolyn Barros that these life-stories are ‘narratives of transformation’ (Barros,1998). These highly accomplished business leaders tend to be action-oriented, setting goals for themselves and taking initiative (cluster 5). With great energy and determination (cluster 1), they set out to seize opportunities and build new businesses (cluster 4), often in pursuit of a dream (cluster 6). Their approach is often one of experimenting, learning by doing, learning from mistakes (cluster 3). This requires common sense, practical problem solving skills, the ability to face reality, and the ability to listen and ask questions (cluster 8). While these exceptionally accomplished leaders appear to have been ‘born’ with strong physical stamina and a reasonable intellect and level of curiosity, their life-stories reveal that through dealing with challenges they gain confidence in their abilities, build self-esteem, learn to overcome shortcomings, and learn to trust their intuition (cluster 9). This does not only affect their learning outlook, making them more capable to deal with subsequent challenges brought on by perpetual change in the business context (clusters 14 & 15), but affects their self-image, building their regard for principles & ethics, responsibility, stewardship, humility, and sense of duty (cluster 2). Identity development and development of the capacity to deal with change grow hand-in-hand as the competent business leader emerges from his / her struggles with the challenges of business.

This paper will now explicitly focus on how these highly accomplished business leaders develop the capacity to deal with change (how they develop their learning outlook). It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an equally detailed empirical analysis of their identity development, though the authors contend that a very similar process of critical incident driven perspective development is key to this process as well, and that identity development and the development of learning outlook go hand-in-hand in the development of business leadership competence.

Formative Events

Taking a further step in the reduction of the textual data, the focus now shifts to identifying and analysing the specific formative events that the leaders themselves report have had a significant influence on their (learning) outlook. While the overview of formative events presented in Table 6 is not exhaustive, one can assume that as they were the most memorable events to the protagonists, that these events had a particularly strong and lasting impact on their perspectives.

| Author | Formative events | Count |
|-------------------|---|-------|
| Truett Cathy | Great Depression (EL), speech impediment (EL), paper route / street vending (S), restaurant fire (EC), cancer (MC), travel to Brazil (MC) | 6 |
| Ray Kroc | Birth of child (EC), business conflict (EC), World War II (MC), launch of McDonald's (MC), failure (MC) | 5 |
| Tom Monaghan | Orphanage (EL), kicked-out of Seminary (S), fired from 1 st Job (S), joining army (EC), WWII (EC), mentor (EC), research trips (EC), near bankruptcy (MC), losing control of company (MC), mentor & role models (MC) | 10 |
| William Rosenberg | Life & death incidents (S), arrested (S), early jobs (EC), anxiety neurosis (EC), getting license (EC), mentor (MC), Role models (MC) | 7 |
| Harland Sanders | Losing 1 st job (S), fight (EC), Operating service station (MC), Great Depression (MC), Life threatening incidents (MC), mentor (MC) | 6 |

| | | |
|----------------------|---|-----|
| Jim McLamore | Great Depression (EL), family (S), business adversity, (EC), mentor (EC), near bankruptcy (MC), role models (MC), associations (MC), investment failures (LC) | 8 |
| Lee Iacocca | Discrimination (S), illness (S), World War II (S), traineeship (EC), success (MC), fired (MC), oil crisis (MC), turnaround (LC) | 8 |
| Sam Walton | Great Depression (EL), saving life (EL), mentors (EC), role model (EC), 1 st store (EC), failures (EC), travel (MC), business reforms (MC) | 8 |
| David Packard | Great Depression (EL), mentor (S), economic crisis (MC), computer revolution (MC), restructuring (LC) | 5 |
| An Wang | World War II (EL), moving to Chinese interior (EL), Harvard (S), discrimination (EC), failures (EC), computer revolution (MC), refinancing the company (MC) | 7 |
| David Rockefeller | Travel (EL), mother (EL), charity (EL), travel (S), leaving home (S), scholars (S), military training (EC), World War II (EC), travel (EC), power struggle (MC), civic projects (MC), advisory positions (LC) | 12 |
| Conrad Hilton | Death of sibling (EL), bargaining (EC), family business (EC), book (EC), Legislature (EC), founding bank (EC), World War I (MC), Great Depression (MC), acquisition negotiations (LC) | 9 |
| Alfred Sloan | Role models (EC), business conflict (EC), economic crisis (MC), management argument (MC) | 4 |
| Tom Ashbrook | Economic crisis (S), Tai Chi (MC), travel (MC), Harvard (MC), resignation (MC), relationship crisis (MC), obtaining venture capital (MC), launch of business (MC), recruiting prof. management (MC) | 9 |
| Jack Welch | Mother (EL), struggle to perform (S), mentors (S), role models (EC), industrial accident (EC), scholars (MC), firing people (MC), illness (MC), failure (MC), success (MC), travel (MC) | 11 |
| Richard Branson | Founding magazine (EC), tax fraud (EC), 1 st store (EC), 1 st artist (EC), ballooning (MC), launching airline (MC), airline crisis (MC) | 7 |
| James Dyson | Bassoon (S), running (S), 1 st commercial venture (EC), sales job (EC), 1 st invention (EC), launch of vacuum cleaner business (MC) | 6 |
| David Ogilvy | Working in Paris (EC), World War II (EC), living among Amish (EC), working for Gallop (EC), market crisis (EC) | 5 |
| Akio Morita | Mother (EL), mentors (S), World War II (S), family business (S), travel (S), travel (EC), moving to USA (MC), failure (MC), success (MC) | 9 |
| Ricardo Semler | 1 st commercial project (S), clash of perspectives (EC), strike (EC), illness (EC), mentor (EC), acquisitions (MC), economic crisis (MC) | 7 |
| Muhammad Yunus | Mother (EL), travel (EL), scouting (S), mentors (S), founding a business (EC), War of Liberation (MC), famine (MC), 1 st branch office (MC) | 8 |
| Katharine Graham | Tutors (EL), camping trips (EL), team captain (S), debating (S), relationship (EC), role models (MC), husband's illness (MC), becoming publisher (MC), strike (MC), Watergate (MC), gender role models (LC) | 11 |
| Marcia Israel-Curley | Great Depression (EL), strike (EC), move to California (EC), business adversity (EC), travel (MC), family crisis (MC), sale of business (MC), strike (LC) | 8 |
| Sandra Kurtzig | Advanced stream (S), solving computer problem (S), 1 st sales experience (EC), selling computer time (EC), trade show (EC), prioritizing projects (MC), restructuring (MC) | 7 |
| Anita Roddick | Mother (EL), books (S), living in Kibbutz (EC), travel (EC), role models (EC), setting up shop in USA (MC), working with consultants (MC), negative publicity (MC) | 8 |
| | | 191 |

Table 6: Formative Events

A first observation from the overview of formative events presented in Table 6 is that all business leaders, without exception, were able to identify and report on at least 4 such events during their life. Furthermore, the remarkable similarity of events mentioned by all leaders, regardless of their nationality, gender, level of education, socio-economic background or industry context, is immediately apparent from a first scan of the data presented in Table 6.

After a process of combining similar events into ranked clusters and combining related clusters into comprehensive clusters, the following seven dominant clusters of formative events (in order of frequency) emerge from the data:

1. Learning from others
2. Dealing with business change
3. Dealing with hardship
4. Early commercial experiences
5. Change of context
6. Personal challenges
7. Dealing with failure & success

The first cluster, learning from others, is comprised of formative events that arise from interaction with family members, mentors in school and at work, and role models. Formative events related to the second cluster: dealing with business change, arose in situations of business conflict, during reorganizations and during acquisition processes. Clusters 3, dealing with hardship, and 5, change of context, confirm the observations made based on the overview of major events during the lives and careers of these highly accomplished business leaders, that events related to economic crises, war, travel and moving abroad affected their perspective. Cluster 4 comprises events related to gaining sales experience and early career commercial ventures. The personal challenges in cluster 6 are related to illness, such as having a heart-attack, and relationship challenges. Finally cluster 7 relates to business events that went well (such as the launch of their first shop) or that turned out to be mistakes (such as the failed introduction of a new product or service). Interestingly, many of these formative events coincide with instances and episodes of significant social and business changes. The data suggests that change brings formative events, and that dealing with change affects these leaders personal outlook and capability to deal with subsequent incidents of change.

Formative Events Per Life Phase

As it was possible to reconstruct a chronology of events from the life-stories, the life phases during which these formative events took place have been noted. For the purpose of this paper a simple categorization is adopted: Early Life: 0-10 years old, School: 10-20 years, Early Career: 20-30 years, Mid-Career: 30-50 years old, and Late Career: age 50 and above. An overview is presented in Table 7.

| # | Comprehensive Formative Event Cluster | Early Life | School | Early Career | Mid Career | Late Career | Total |
|---|---------------------------------------|------------|--------|--------------|------------|-------------|-------|
| 1 | Learning from others | 6 | 6 | 8 | 7 | 1 | 28 |
| 2 | Dealing with business change | 0 | 2 | 5 | 15 | 3 | 25 |
| 3 | Dealing with hardship | 6 | 3 | 4 | 11 | 0 | 24 |
| 4 | Early commercial experiences | 0 | 2 | 13 | 7 | 0 | 22 |
| 5 | Change of context | 4 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 0 | 19 |
| 6 | Personal challenges | 2 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 14 |
| 7 | Dealing with failures & success | 0 | 0 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 11 |
| | | 18 | 17 | 45 | 58 | 5 | 143 |

Table 7: Formative Events Per Life Phase

Remarkably, only 18 of the 143 formative events included in the comprehensive clusters took place in the early life phase, and only 17 of the 143 events occurred during the 'school' phase of the business leaders' lives. In total only 35 out of 143, or just under a quarter of all events occurred during the early life and school phases combined (the first 20 years, before starting their working lives). Thus fully three quarters of all formative events reported by these highly accomplished business leaders were encountered during the career phase of their lives. This is clear evidence of a significant amount of career-long development in business practice, as opposed to learning during formal education early in life. Not only are leaders not 'born', and is leadership not 'taught' in school: leadership competence is developed through interaction with formative events encountered throughout their career.

Effects on Learning Outlook

To gain an understanding of the way in which the formative events affected the perspectives of the business leaders, a paired analysis is undertaken in which for each of the formative events identified by the business leaders, the self-reported effects on their capability to deal with change (learning outlook) is recorded. The concept of learning outlook in this paper comprises the aspects: awareness of the need to learn, motivation to keep learning, tendency to identify and seek learning opportunities, and focus on specific learning activities.

Again, employing a ranked frequency clustering technique, it was possible to identify eight distinct effects of the formative events on the learning outlook of the leaders. These effects include:

1. Studying
2. Enquiring
3. Trying
4. Trusting
5. Feeling
6. Exploring
7. Reflecting
8. Analyzing

The 1st cluster: studying, includes such effects as getting an education and learning a trade. Enquiring relates to learning to ask questions, to listen, and to get advice. The third cluster labelled 'trying' includes learning to experiment, challenge, innovate. Trusting is related to learning to gain confidence in one's own abilities, building self-esteem, learning self-reliance. Feeling has to do with learning to rely on one's intuition, learning to follow instinct. The 6th cluster: exploring is related to learning to observe and conduct focused enquiry. Reflecting includes learning to question one's own assumptions, and learning to reflect on own competencies. Finally, analyzing is related to learning to reason, learning to process complex information, learning to suspend judgment and make informed decisions.

Paired formative events and effects on learning outlook

Table 8 provides an overview of the reported effects on learning outlook associated with each of the formative events identified by the highly accomplished business leaders.

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Total |
|---|------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|----------|---------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------|
| | | Studying | Enquiring | Trying | Trusting | Feeling | Exploring | Reflecting | Analyzing | |
| 1 | Learning from others | 6 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 0 | 28 |
| 2 | Dealing with business change | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 11 | 25 |
| 3 | Dealing with hardship | 8 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 24 |
| 4 | Early commercial experiences | 0 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 22 |
| 5 | Change of context | 3 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 19 |
| 6 | Personal challenges | 4 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 14 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|-----|
| 7 | Dealing with failures & success | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 11 |
| | | 23 | 33 | 14 | 16 | 6 | 13 | 23 | 15 | 143 |

Table 8: Formative Events and Effects on Learning Outlook

Several strong pairs of formative events and related effects on learning outlook emerge from this analysis. Particularly frequent are the paired mention of: learning from others and enquiring, dealing with hardship and studying, early commercial experiences and trying & trusting, change of context and exploring, and: dealing with business change and analysing. A further dimension can be added to these observations by noting the life phase during which they were prevalent.

Formative Event & Learning Outlook Pairs Per Life Phase

Table 9 provides an overview of prevalent pairs of formative events and effects on learning outlook reported by the highly accomplished business leaders. It gives a dynamic picture of the types of formative events that these leaders have encountered from early life throughout their careers and the effects that these events have had on their capability to deal with change.

| | Formative Events | Effects on Learning Outlook |
|--------------|---|--|
| Early Life | 3. Dealing with hardship | 1. Studying |
| School | 1. Learning from others | 1. Studying |
| Early Career | 1. Learning from others 4. Early commercial experiences 4. Early commercial experiences 5. Change of context | 2. Enquiring 3. Trying 4. Trusting 6. Exploring |
| Mid Career | 2. Dealing with business change 6. Personal challenges 7. Dealing with failures & successes | 8. Analyzing 7. Reflecting 8. Feeling |
| Late Career | - | - |

Table 9: Formative Events and Effects on Learning Outlook Per Life Phase

A draw-back of the comprehensive clustering method is that the results are of a generalized, aggregate nature, somewhat removed from the richness of experience and individuality of perspective that the actual life-stories contain. Therefore, in the final paragraph of this empirical section of this paper the focus will return to the level of the individual leaders. An actual example will be given of each of the prevalent pairs of formative events and their effects on learning outlook per life phase that were identified in Table 9.

- Jim McLamore (Burger King) notes how growing up (Life Phase: Early Life) during the Great Depression (Formative Event: Dealing with hardship) made him determined to pursue and complete a college education (Effect on Learning Outlook: Studying). He earned a degree in Hotel Administration which helped prepare him for a career in the Food Service industry.
- David Packard (Hewlett-Packard) writes how in High School (Life Phase: School) he was counselled by a physics teacher / mentor whom he admired (Formative Event: Learning from others) which inspired him to develop his electronics hobby and pursue Engineering studies (Effect on Learning Outlook: Studying). From these activities sprang his first electronics ventures.

- Sam Walton (Wal-Mart) describes how, when he was setting up his first store (Life Phase: Early Career) he noticed how another shop-keeper (Formative Event: Learning from others) regularly observed his competition and would ask questions. This led him to develop his own inquisitive faculties (Effect on Learning Outlook: Enquiring). Walton notes how observing the competition and asking lots of questions became an integral part of his weekly business routine for the rest of his life.
- James Dyson (Dyson) recounts how, shortly after graduating (Life Phase: Early Career) he managed to turn his first invention: the 'Ballbarrow' (a wheelbarrow with a spherical wheel) into a business venture (Formative Event: Early Commercial Experience) which he reports built his confidence in learning and innovating through trial & error (Effect on Learning Outlook: Trying). Dyson would come to refer to this as his 'Edisonian' approach, which he employed to great effect in developing his innovative 'bagless' vacuum cleaners.
- Richard Branson (Virgin) describes how running and developing his first shop (Life Phase: Early Career) a High Street record store in London (Formative Event: Early Commercial Experience) taught him to trust his intuition (Effect on Learning Outlook: Trusting). He notes that this experience was the catalyst for what he would later describe as his: "Screw it, lets do it!" outlook.
- Akio Morita (Sony) notes how after building up the factories in Japan (Life Phase: Mid Career) he started travelling to Europe (visiting Philips Electronics) and the US (touring General Electric) (Formative Event: Change of context) which taught him how to observe and adapt to new cultures and business practices (Effect on Learning Outlook: Exploring). Morita describes how this outlook served him well in establishing and developing Sony USA.
- Ricardo Semler (Semco) recounts how, during the late 80's (Life Phase: Mid Career) he started considering acquisitions of other businesses (Formative Event: Dealing with business change) which made him learn how to assimilate and process complex business information (Effect on Learning Outlook: Analyzing). These activities triggered his subsequent efforts to professionalize and attend the Executive Management Program at Harvard.
- Truett Cathy (Chick-Fil-A) describes how, in the mids of expanding his restaurant chain (Life Phase: Mid Career) he suffered and overcame a bout of cancer (Formative Event: Personal Challenge) which he reports taught him to pause more often and reflect on his goals and competencies (Effect on Learning Outlook: Reflecting). Cathy describes how a more 'deliberate' outlook both benefited his further business career and brought a more fulfilling personal life.
- Tom Monaghan (Domino's Pizza) writes how, after many years of building his restaurant chain (Life Phase: Mid Career) his company abandoned the strategy of locating the restaurants near college campuses and nearly went bankrupt (Formative Event: Dealing with failure & success) which taught him to make better judgments, following his business intuition (Effect on Learning Outlook: Feeling). Monaghan describes how for the rest of his career he would not be drawn into business ventures 'that did not feel right'.

The examples presented above illustrate that highly accomplished business leaders from a diversity of social networks, contexts, and pedigree, can all identify a number of similar formative events throughout their life and career, that have shaped their (identity and)

learning perspective, contributing to the development of their distinctive business leadership competence.

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