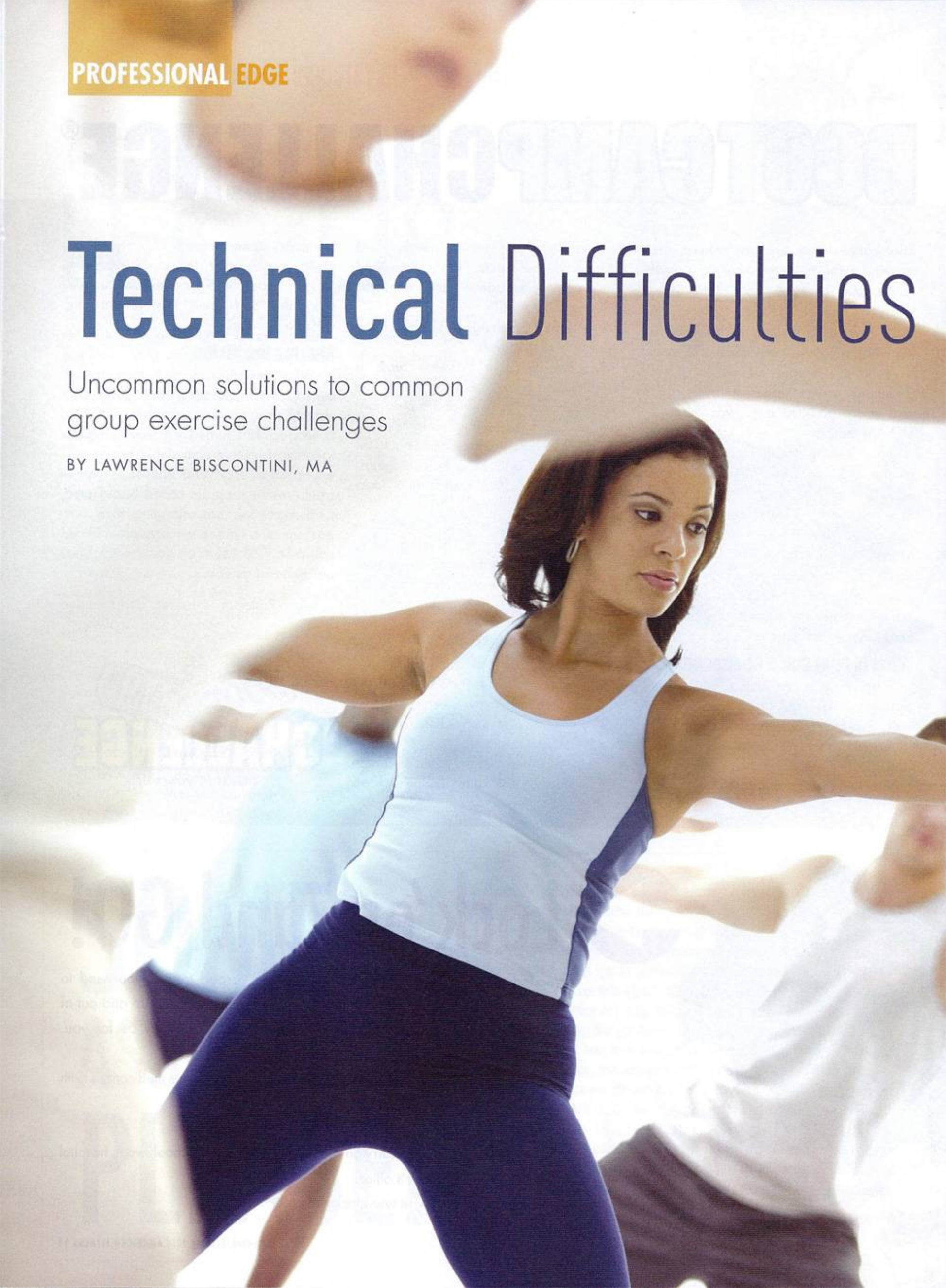


PROFESSIONAL EDGE

# Technical Difficulties

Uncommon solutions to common group exercise challenges

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA





Group fitness instructors face countless possible variables in any given class. In addition to being prepared with choreography, programming and safety considerations, we also must consider classroom dynamics, lighting, electronics, equipment, and even minor details like temperature and smells. On top of that come the dynamics of the participants! While we can prepare for many of these elements, some catch us by surprise and can be neither predicted nor controlled. Nevertheless, a bit of wisdom shared from some veteran presenters who have found creative solutions to common challenges can help us all plan for success in even the most trying times. Instead of thinking of the following issues as “problems,” considering these issues as “challenges” and “opportunities for growth” in disguise can help us all grow as instructors as we glean some uncommon solutions to common issues. These tips will help us prepare for those less-than-perfect moments in group fitness.

*When the equipment is not there or when there is not enough of it*

Leslee Bender, creator of Bender Ball®, says “when...there are more participants than balls, think of creating partner work. Use creativity, including having one do something then have the other do something. When one is moving, the ‘watcher’ becomes that person’s professional ‘spotter’..., offering individual feedback during the person’s movement. Mindy Mylrea (Fit Flex Productions) and I did partner play with one ball shared between us. We also incorporated Gliding™ discs with the partner work. Alternatively, make a circuit with stations where they all have to do something different in different places, and not all stations include the equipment but emphasize something else, such as cardio or flexibility. As people revolve from stations, everyone gets to use the equipment a fair amount.”

If partner work is not an option, you may wish to reconsider the format of the class and incorporate exercises needing no equipment. This requires having a

varied “emergency toolbox” to use in such cases.

*When the microphone or music goes down*

Carol Scott of ECA World Fitness knows how to solve audio problems on the spot. “First, NEVER bash the club. Roll with it. Take the opportunity to lower the music and make that class all about education. In most class types, you can even teach without the music all together. If it is a high-intensity cardio class, you can teach without a mic. Before you begin, advise participants that, due to technical difficulties, you will not be using a mic, therefore, rather than scream your head off, you will use visual cueing techniques instead, so they need to pay more attention to watching today than listening. Furthermore, if they depend on counting, you can assign different people in the class to count out different exercise sets, making the group dynamics of the class really fun and interesting because people start noticing and paying attention to each other. If you don’t want to lower the music the entire time, select key opportunities to turn down the volume so they can hear your vocal cues. In addition, take the opportunity to walk the room to get up close and personal with your members so they can hear you and get a more personalized experience.”

Scott also says that she has taught abroad in countries where she did not speak the local language and relied on using visual cues. “It is actually very refreshing to shut up for once and watch everyone’s eyes on me. Ultimately, it helps me hone my visual cueing skills.”

*When people disagree about the appropriate temperature in the room*

Deborah Puskarich, Group Exercise Director for the Cooper Fitness Center at Craig Ranch, says, “never will everyone agree on the right temperature for Pilates and yoga, so we have implemented a policy that includes two things. First, our policy advises that our average temperature can fluctuate between 74 to 80 degrees and, second, it requires everyone to dress in layers. In this way,

everyone knows what to expect and how to prepare. No more do class members complain about the temperature because they have become proactive, either putting on clothing layers or taking them off as needed.”

*When a cycle becomes unusable or there is one more participant than cycles*

Gregg Cook, cycling fitness instructor for Equinox clubs, always offers up his bike if there is a member who needs one. “To make that person feel more comfortable, I will try to take the bike off of the ‘stage’...out of the center of attention. If I can’t, then I’ll choose someone in the class I know who will feel comfortable on the stage and use him or her as an example while I walk around.”

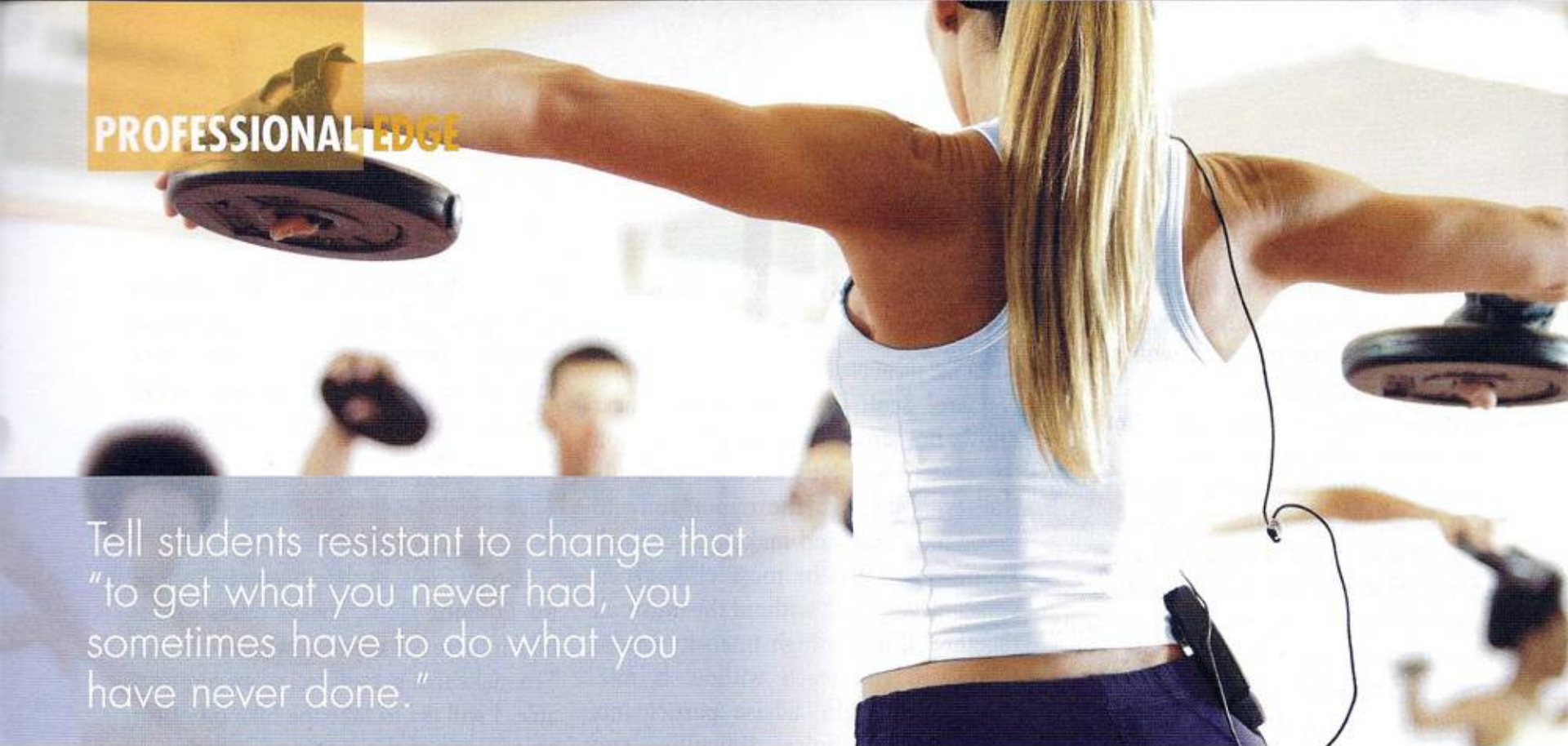
*When someone questions the debate between prechoreographed and freestyle teaching*

Maureen Hagan, 2006 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year and 1998 IDEA Program Director of the Year, says that “being able to teach both prechoreography programs, such as Les Mills, and freestyle choreography is, for a fitness instructor, the best of both worlds. With the Les Mills programs, I am able to teach to my strengths while at the same time I am motivated to hone my teaching skills in areas that I do not naturally lead with. This has definitely made me an even better instructor, coach and motivator. Teaching freestyle choreography allows me to explore my creative side and remain a versatile instructor. I have been able to take the skills I have learned in freestyle and transfer them to prechoreography and vice versa. Ultimately, teaching both styles makes me a better teacher overall.”

*Members show up late, disrupting the class (and the club policy allows latecomers)*

Karen Blank, CPT, and Director of Training for the YMCA of Greater Rochester, says that, when a latecomer arrives, she will quickly assign a familiar exercise to the rest of the participants to get them started. “I will then help [the latecomer] get set up in a way that shows respect for





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the others in class. If it is a movement-based class, I will keep the flow going and move closer to [the latecomer] reminding them to take additional time to warm up. My rule of thumb is to make everyone welcome, but help members subtly understand how [being] late impacts other participants.”

Participants during class are disruptive and/or chatty

Sometimes participants conduct disruptive conversations. Bernadette O'Brien, aquatics instructor based in New Jersey, suggests increasing the intensity so that the chatty participants are using available oxygen for breathing instead of chatting. “I try to make the choreography interesting and challenging. ‘Interesting’ means that they need to pay attention because of complexity. ‘Challenging’ means that it is impossible for them to chat because they are breathing heavily just to execute the movements.”

Still, some participants may continue to chat. O'Brien says she may “call out one talker's name, while I'm smiling, and remind him or her to either keep his/ her shoulders down, or his/ her hands in the water, or whatever is appropriate at the time so that the talker's attention is refocused toward me.” Mark Hendricks, Group Fitness Manager for Equinox Fitness Clubs in New York City, agrees. “The smile is important,” he explains, “so that nobody takes offense. You want to keep control of the class with authoritative words, and the smile maintains a friendly atmosphere.”

Fitness presenter, Carol Murphy, offers additional, practical suggestions. To regain

the attention of chatting participants, she recommends “increasing or decreasing the music volume, being very animated and dynamic in your body language, and changing your vocal tones from loud to soft, all while projecting positive energy. The changes cause the disruptive people to refocus.”

Participants show resistance to change

Participants gravitate to teachers they love because of style, time of day and results. When even a favorite instructor introduces change, participants sometimes resist. Steve Feinberg, veteran instructor of Equinox Fitness Clubs in New York City, suggests that the secret lies in how you introduce change. He tells his students “you can do *anything* new for 60 seconds! Remember that trying something new is the sign of progress in life, and success leads to more success.”

As a corporate trainer, this author suggests promising students that new changes will bring about new results. Using the word “results” captures their attention, and people are more willing to leave their cocoon of comfort if you can promise them a better cocoon! Tell students resistant to change that “to get what you never had, you sometimes have to do what you have never done.”

Participants disrupt class by leaving early

Deirdre (DeDe) Daniels, E-RYT, Movement Facilitator and yoga DVD star, reminds the participants at the start of the session that quiet time is part of the class, and that poses like savasana are the most

important for recovery. “If, however, they cannot stay for the entire savasana, then I invite them to take class near the door so they can make their exit just as we are beginning the corpse pose, so as not to disturb those who are staying. Meanwhile, for the rest of the class, I remind students to let go of any distractions, including any activity around them, and focus inwardly (usually on the breath), moving away from outside stimuli. Finally, I sometimes suggest students rub their palms together vigorously and place their warmed hands over their ears for 5 to 10 breaths, which can bring some silence to an otherwise noisy situation.”

In conclusion

These practical, distinct suggestions to common dilemmas offer a unique refresher to solving challenges on a daily basis. The more instructors can plan options to handle such situations, the more likely that the outcome will be positive for all. In group movement, while none of us sets out planning to fail, it happens that we sometimes fail to plan.

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