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Between Structure and Meaning: Enabling Transformation in Safety Management

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Abstract

Organizational change in safety management is often approached as a linear and controllable process: leadership defines objectives, measurement systems and action plans are deployed, and operational engagement is encouraged to drive improvement. This sequence tends to produce measurable progress in early stages of maturity, where compliance mechanisms and incentives are sufficient. However, it systematically fails to generate genuine transformation in more advanced organizations, where progress depends on collective sense-making rather than procedural control.

Drawing on classical and contemporary theories of organizational change (Lewin, Schein, Weick, Pettigrew, Alvesson, among others), this paper proposes a 2×2 matrix mapping four paradigms of transformation along two dimensions: how change is conceived (planned vs. emergent) and what it seeks to transform (technical vs. social). Each quadrant represents a distinct logic—instrumental, systemic, narrative, or critical—highlighting that real transformation requires their reconciliation rather than their opposition.

Empirical insights are drawn from a longitudinal collaboration with a large multinational organization operating in more than twenty countries. Its maturity program and audit practices provided a rich basis to observe how structure, meaning, and authority interact in practice. The findings suggest that transformation becomes possible only when organizations deliberately work the interface between structure and meaning, turning assessment frameworks into learning infrastructures and enabling a renewed relationship between authority, learning, and trust across all levels of the organization.

Keywords: Safety culture; Safety leadership; Maturity models; Organizational learning; Safety transformation.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Question

Despite their limitations, safety maturity models remain valuable operational tools in risk management (Foussard et al., 2025). They provide structured means to diagnose an organization's stage of development and define improvement roadmaps. Through assessments and benchmarking, they help visualize progress, align managerial narratives, and structure performance monitoring. Yet these models often fail to deliver effective transformation. They describe where an organization stands and where it should go, but say little about how change actually occurs or why it so often stalls in practice. In large multinational organizations, safety management operates within a persistent tension between structural control and collective meaning. Governance systems built around audits, indicators, and compliance frameworks ensure global consistency and risk control, but can constrain local interpretation and adaptive capacity. Conversely, participatory efforts may foster dialogue but lack the structural leverage required to sustain change across complex operational systems. The recurring outcome is measurable progress in reporting and compliance, yet limited change in how people interpret, decide, and act under evolving risk conditions. This paper addresses a central question: what enables genuine cultural transformation in safety management? More specifically, how can organizations move beyond assessment toward developing the capacity to adapt, interpret, and manage risk more effectively over time?

1.2 Research Positioning

This paper reframes safety transformation within an epistemological matrix of change, shifting the focus from maturity as evaluation toward maturity as transformation capacity. Rather than treating culture as a variable to measure, we conceptualize it as a dynamic interface between structure and meaning, where managerial systems and collective sensemaking must be continuously reconnected. Our analysis shows that many change initiatives succeed in generating compliance and short-term performance gains but fail to generate sustained organizational learning. We argue that transformation becomes sustainable only when the relationship between structural mechanisms (governance, indicators, standards) and social meaning (interpretation, trust, legitimacy) is deliberately mediated. This reframing extends maturity-based models by specifying the conditions under which safety performance becomes generative rather than merely reportable. It provides both an explanatory framework for researchers and a structured basis for practitioners seeking to enhance long-term risk governance capability.

1.3 Explicit Contributions

Beyond this reframing, the paper advances three concrete contributions to risk management research. First, it identifies a recurrent mediation failure mechanism explaining why safety maturity programs stabilize despite increasing structural sophistication, thereby clarifying a common source of stagnation in safety performance improvement efforts. Second, it formalizes the organizational conditions under which transformation becomes sustainable, through a double mediation process linking authority, learning, structure, and interpretation. Third, it introduces a structured diagnostic matrix that enables practitioners to identify stagnation patterns and design targeted transformation roadmaps within complex safety governance systems.

1.4 Theoretical Propositions

Building on this positioning, the paper advances five interrelated propositions regarding safety transformation in large multinational organizations.

- *P1 Mediation Failure Mechanism.*

Safety maturity programs systematically stabilize at intermediate levels when mediation between authority and learning is structurally indirect and routed primarily through compliance infrastructures (audits, KPIs, standards). In such configurations, structural reinforcement does not translate into interpretive transformation.

- *P2 Structural Stabilization without Interpretive Shift.*

Structural reinforcement can increase organizational coherence and performance indicators without transforming collective interpretations of risk. Improvements in governance architecture do not necessarily alter how risk is understood and enacted in everyday work.

- *P3 Double Mediation Requirement.*

Sustained safety transformation requires a sequential and recursive double mediation process:
(A) direct mediation between authority and learning through dialogical and reflexive practices;
(B) integration of emerging interpretations into durable structural systems.

- *P4 Diagnostic and Operational Utility of the Matrix.*

The proposed 2×2 matrix constitutes an analytical and operational diagnostic framework. It enables practitioners to identify whether stagnation results from structural over-stabilization, weak interpretive integration, or misaligned mediation pathways, thereby informing the design of targeted transformation roadmaps within complex risk governance systems.

- *P5 Redefinition of Safety Maturity.*

Safety maturity should be conceptualized not as a level of structural sophistication, but as an epistemic capability: the organizational capacity to reconfigure mediation pathways between governance systems and collective sensemaking in response to experience.

1.5 Structure of the paper

The paper is structured in four parts.

The first section reviews the main theoretical traditions of organizational change (planned, systemic, processual, and critical) and discusses how each frames both the *mechanisms* and the *object* of transformation. This review provides the foundation to integrate these paradigms along two analytical dimensions: *how change is conceived* (planned vs. emergent) and *what change seeks to transform* (technical structures vs. social meaning).

The second section presents a synthetic 2×2 conceptual matrix as a theoretical framework for understanding the conditions that enable or constrain transformation in safety management. Each quadrant is discussed as a coherent yet partial perspective, illustrating the specific strengths and practical limitations that organizations encounter when adopting one logic over another.

The third section interprets empirical insights drawn from a longitudinal collaboration with a large multinational engineering and construction organization operating as part of a global industrial group. Focusing on safety management systems deployed across multiple countries and project-based contexts, it examines how maturity-based approaches often succeed in diagnosis but struggle to sustain transformation over time. These observations support the argument that durable change depends less on the accumulation of managerial devices than on the mediation between structural arrangements and collective sensemaking.

Finally, the discussion and conclusion articulate the implications of this perspective for both research and practice. The paper proposes that the role of the safety professional or consultant is not to impose change, but to mediate between structure and meaning, creating the conditions through which authority and learning can evolve together within complex organizations.

2 Organizational Change: A Plural and Evolving Field

The study of organizational change constitutes one of the most diverse and conceptually rich areas in management research. Over the past seven decades, it has given rise to multiple, and sometimes competing, traditions, each proposing distinct ways of understanding how organizations evolve and what "transformation" actually means. From behavioral psychology to systems theory, from process studies to critical management research, the field encompasses a wide spectrum of epistemologies and methodologies. This diversity is both a strength and a challenge: it reflects the complexity of organizational life while making it difficult to articulate a unified theory of change. To navigate this landscape, the following section revisits four major traditions (i.e. planned, systemic, processual, and critical) that together form the conceptual foundation for the analytical framework developed in this paper.

2.1 Instrumental and planned approaches to organizational change

Instrumental or planned approaches constitute the foundational tradition of modern change management. Rooted in Kurt Lewin's (1947) pioneering work, these models conceptualize change as a sequential, rational, and controllable process. Lewin's well-known triad (unfreezing, changing, refreezing) reflects the idea that organizations can be intentionally destabilized, guided through transition, and re-stabilized at a new equilibrium. Within this logic, change is primarily a problem of implementation: success depends on designing appropriate steps, structures, and incentives to move actors from the current state to a desired one. This rationalist tradition was further elaborated by John Kotter (1995), who codified transformation into eight managerial steps (e.g., establishing urgency, creating a guiding coalition, communicating a vision). In strategic and structural design, Alfred Chandler (1962) and Jay Galbraith (1973) extended this perspective by asserting that structure follows strategy and that organizations can be engineered through deliberate alignment between objectives, resources, and coordination mechanisms. Across these frameworks, change is conceived as a linear movement from intention to execution, with measurable outcomes and controllable deviations. Applied to safety management, this paradigm appears in transformation roadmaps, maturity assessments, and performance indicators designed to regulate behavior through standardization and accountability. While effective in stabilizing practices and ensuring compliance at early maturity stages, such approaches tend to reduce transformation to execution, leaving limited space for emergence, ambiguity, or the co-construction of meaning that underpins deeper cultural change.

2.2 Systemic and socio-technical approaches to organizational change

Emerging in the 1950s as a critique of mechanistic and hierarchical models, systemic and socio-technical approaches reconceptualized change as a continuous process of alignment between technical systems, social systems, and their environment. Rather than viewing change as a discrete intervention, these perspectives emphasize

interdependence and the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium between efficiency and human meaning. The socio-technical tradition, developed at the Tavistock Institute, introduced the principle of joint optimization, arguing that neither technical design nor social structure alone can ensure performance or resilience (Emery & Trist, 1965). Change is therefore negotiated through participation, experimentation, and local redesign of work systems. Beckhard (1969) and Pasmore (1988) extended this perspective within organization development (OD), promoting iterative cycles of diagnosis, feedback, and action. Edgar Schein (2010) added a cultural dimension, framing change as a process of learning and unlearning collective assumptions: transformation occurs when new patterns of meaning become embedded beyond formal structures. In safety management, these approaches underpin frameworks that link performance to organizational learning, leadership engagement, and worker involvement, shifting the focus from compliance toward the co-creation of safe operating practices.

2.3 Processual and interpretive approaches to organizational change

Processual and interpretive approaches emerged in response to the rigidity of planned and systemic models, emphasizing the temporal, contextual, and sensemaking nature of change. Rather than viewing organizations as entities that undergo change, they conceptualize them as ongoing processes of organizing (Weick, 1979). Change is not a project to be implemented but a flow of interactions through which actors interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct their environment. Karl Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking situates transformation in the everyday construction of meaning from equivocal events. Change occurs not because plans are executed, but because collective interpretations shift, enabling new patterns of coordination and identity. This perspective has been influential in safety-critical contexts, where professionals continuously reinterpret weak signals and fragmented information under time pressure. Sensemaking is not merely cognitive but also professional and relational (Foussard et al., 2024), unfolding through situated practices that re-establish order under uncertainty. Andrew Pettigrew's (1990, 2013) processual analysis complements this view by emphasizing the interrelation of context, content, and process. Change must be understood historically and politically, as an evolving configuration rather than a linear trajectory. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) and Langley et al. (2013) extend this perspective by framing organizations as temporally unfolding processes of becoming. In safety management, these approaches inform practices centered on learning from everyday work, narrative inquiry, and the co-construction of safety meaning through dialogue and reflection, treating change as collective inquiry rather than design implementation.

2.4 Critical and political approaches to organizational change

Critical and political approaches challenge the assumption that organizational change is a neutral, rational, or inherently progressive process. Instead, they interpret transformation as a field of power, discourse, and legitimacy. From this perspective, change initiatives are not only technical undertakings but also symbolic performances through which organizations seek to maintain authority, moral credibility, and external legitimacy. Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott (1992, 2012) were among the first to articulate this critical stance, showing how managerial discourses on change and culture often serve as technologies of control rather than emancipation. The rhetoric of participation or empowerment, they argue, frequently conceals subtle mechanisms of normalization, aligning individual identity with organizational ideology. Similarly, Michael Power's (1997) concept of the *audit society* highlights how the proliferation of measurement systems creates a culture of reassurance rather than genuine learning. Audits, indicators, and maturity assessments thus operate as rituals of verification, reinforcing legitimacy rather than transforming practice. In the field of safety, Motet et al. (2017) have extended this critical tradition by revealing how "safety culture" and "resilience" discourses can function as moral economies, mobilizing shared ideals while obscuring structural constraints and contradictions. From this viewpoint, change is less about developing new capabilities than about redefining acceptable narratives of responsi-bility and trust within the organization. These perspectives remind us that transformation cannot be understood without accounting for the political and symbolic dimensions of organizational life. They invite a shift from asking *how change should be managed* to asking *whose interests it serves, what meanings it produces, and what silences it entails*. Within the broader reflection on safety management, they offer a necessary counterpoint: one that reveals how cultural transformation can become an ideological project, and why genuine learning requires confronting, rather than masking, these tensions.

3 Integrating the Four Paradigms: Toward an Epistemological Matrix of Change

The four traditions reviewed above (e.g. instrumental, systemic, processual, and critical) do not merely represent different schools of thought; they embody distinct epistemologies of change**,** each grounded in specific assumptions about how organizations evolve and what can, or should, be transformed. The instrumental approach conceives

change as a *planned sequence of actions*, driven by management intent and controllable mechanisms. The systemic and socio-technical perspective reframes it as a *process of alignment* between interdependent subsystems, emphasizing participation and adaptation. The processual and interpretive current sees change as *emergent sensemaking*, rooted in everyday interactions and collective learning. Finally, critical perspectives expose change as a *political project*, where power, legitimacy, and identity are continuously negotiated. These four views can be organized along two analytical dimensions: how change is conceived (ranging from *planned* to *emergent*) and what change seeks to transform (from *technical structures* to *social meaning)*. Crossing these axes yields a 2×2 matrix that maps the epistemological space of safety transformation (see fig.1). Each quadrant reflects a coherent but partial logic: the instrumental paradigm (control and compliance), the systemic paradigm (coordination and participation), the processual paradigm (learning and interpretation), and the critical paradigm (legitimacy and power).

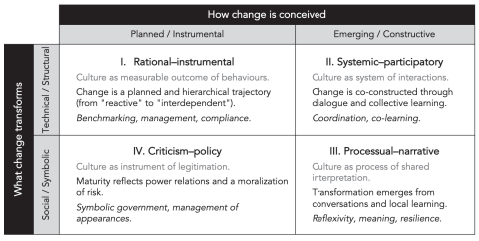


Figure 1. The different conceptions of organizational change.

Real organizational transformations, however, rarely unfold within the boundaries of a single paradigm. Safety programs, in particular, often combine managerial planning, participatory rhetoric, interpretive practices, and political negotiation. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between paradigms but to articulate them coherently to recognize when control is necessary, when learning is possible, and when meaning must be renegotiated. The proposed matrix serves as a framework to interpret this coexistence and to explore how organizations can move from assessment to transformation by bridging the technical and social dimensions of change.

4 Empirical insights from large multinational safety programs

The empirical material presented here derives from a longitudinal collaboration with a large multinational organization operating across more than twenty countries. Its maturity program, audit practices, and leadership routines provided a rich empirical basis to observe how structure, meaning, and authority interact in practice. Rather than presenting a detailed case description, this section synthesizes recurring mechanisms through which safety transformation is enacted in large, multi-site systems, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: structuring and learning infrastructures, meaning and practice, and authority as mediation.

4.1 Structuring and learning infrastructures

In large multinational organizations, maintaining structural coherence is essential to manage business units operating under highly diverse regulatory, cultural, and market conditions. Audits, standards, and cultural maturity assessments form the backbone of this coherence by providing a shared reference framework and a common safety language across sites. However, structure alone does not generate engagement; it merely creates the conditions under which engagement may emerge. In the organization under study, audits have progressively been redesigned to serve not only compliance objectives but also learning purposes. Site-based discussions are systematically integrated to explore the reasons behind deviations and local interpretations of risk. Audit results and maturity assessments are openly discussed with site management, fostering ownership of both strengths and vulnerabilities. This logic is reinforced through cross-visits between business units, which enable practitioners from different regions to observe practices firsthand, exchange perspectives, and develop a transversal understanding of safety challenges. Through these mechanisms, what was initially a control infrastructure gradually becomes a learning infrastructure, supporting collective reflection rather than mere verification.

4.2 Meaning, interpretation, and practice

Beyond structural alignment, transformation depends on the organization's ability to reconnect safety practices with shared meaning. Manager engagement visits play a central role in this process by deliberately shifting the focus away from checklists toward listening, inquiry, and recognition. Leaders ask open questions, acknowledge effective practices, and explore operational constraints, creating spaces where employees can describe work as it is actually performed rather than as it is prescribed. High-potential incidents are treated as opportunities for organizational learning rather than as failures to be sanctioned. Reviews focus on decision-making processes, contextual pressures, and systemic contributors, and the resulting insights are circulated across business units to support collective learning. To translate this learning into daily practice, extensive technical documentation has been transformed into concise, visual operational guides emphasizing critical steps and

decision points. These materials facilitate shared understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries and are routinely used in pre-task briefings. This transformation of procedures illustrates how safety artefacts can shift from prescriptive constraints to sensemaking supports, enabling practitioners to reconnect protective actions with their underlying intent (Foussard, 2025). Together, these practices enable the organization to move from procedural compliance toward a situated and meaningful engagement with risk.

4.3 Authority, mediation, and digital support

The evolution of leadership practices illustrates how authority can function as a mediating force between structure and meaning. Rather than enforcing compliance through hierarchical control, leadership is increasingly conceived as a relational practice grounded in visibility, dialogue, and field engagement. Senior managers regularly visit sites, not to inspect but to understand, reinforcing the idea that leadership in safety must be embodied rather than delegated. This mediation role is further reflected in the organization's performance management system, which prioritizes leading indicators such as engagement visits, learning reviews, and peer exchanges over lagging indicators like injury rates. Measurement is thus repositioned as a trigger for reflection rather than a tool for justification. Digital technologies extend this mediating capacity by supporting learning without reinforcing surveillance. Virtual reality is used to train workers and contractors on major risks in an immersive and inclusive manner, while artificial intelligence tools help identify weak signals in operational data to initiate dialogue and collective sensemaking. Through this combination of leadership practices, performance systems, and digital tools, authority becomes an enabler of trust and learning, sustaining the connection between structural expectations and lived experience. Building on these empirical insights, the following section synthesizes the observed patterns into a typical trajectory of safety transformation.

5 From Structural Control to Mediated Transformation

5.1 A recurrent transformation trajectory

Across the empirical material, a recurrent transformation trajectory can be observed in large safety-critical organizations (see Fig.2). Organizational change initiatives typically begin with a top-management mandate (quadrant IV), where authority defines objectives, priorities, and expectations. This initial impulse is then translated into a phase of structuring and measurement (quadrant I), relying on audits, KPIs, standards, and action plans to stabilize practices and ensure organizational alignment. Training programs, engagement initiatives, and participatory devices are subsequently deployed to mobilize local actors and foster involvement (quadrant II).

This trajectory reflects a conventional mode of mediation: the relationship between power (IV) and learning (II) is not established directly, but is routed through structure (I), which functions as an obligatory passage point. In this configuration, authority acts primarily through formal systems, and participation unfolds within predefined structural frames.

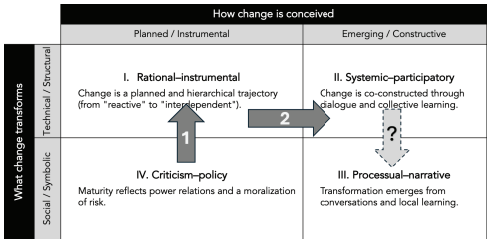


Figure 2. The "classic" trajectories of implementation of organizational change.

This sequence proves effective in generating compliance and visible progress at early stages of maturity. It improves reporting, clarifies responsibilities, and strengthens coordination across complex organizational settings. However, it also reveals a systematic limitation. While organizations invest heavily in structure and participation, they rarely succeed in reaching the interpretive dimension of change (quadrant III). The transformation of meaning (i.e. how risk is understood, interpreted, and enacted in everyday work) remains weakly connected to formal change efforts.

As a result, many safety transformation programs plateau. They improve what is measured and discussed, but fail to alter how work is collectively made sense of. Similar limitations of maturity-based safety programs have been reported in recent studies, showing that improvements in organizational structures and participation do not necessarily lead to sustained changes in safety practices or risk understanding over time (Afsharian et al., 2025).

5.2 Why transformation stalls: a mediation failure

The empirical material suggests that this plateau does not result from poor implementation or insufficient commitment, but from a specific failure of mediation. As long as structure (quadrant I) and meaning (quadrant III) remain weakly connected, organizational learning remains superficial.

In the dominant configuration observed, the mediation between power (quadrant IV) and

learning (quadrant II) is achieved primarily through structural mechanisms. Top management believes it is steering transformation through governance systems, standards, and indicators; local actors believe they are participating through dialogue, training, and engagement initiatives. Yet these two dynamics remain loosely coupled. Learning occurs, but within frames that are already stabilized and rarely questioned. Research on psychosocial safety climate points to similar patterns: leadership commitment and organizational priorities are necessary but insufficient conditions for reducing injury risk when safety is not deeply integrated into everyday sensemaking and work practices (Pienkowski et al., 2025). Measurement produces reassurance rather than insight, and participation generates compliance rather than genuine reappropriation.

In this configuration, interpretive practices develop at the margins. Dialogue, reflection, and local sensemaking may occur, but they lack organizational leverage. Structural mechanisms stabilize behavior but remain externally imposed; interpretive efforts generate understanding but fail to reshape structures. The critical relation between structure (I) and meaning (III) therefore remains largely inaccessible (see Fig.3).

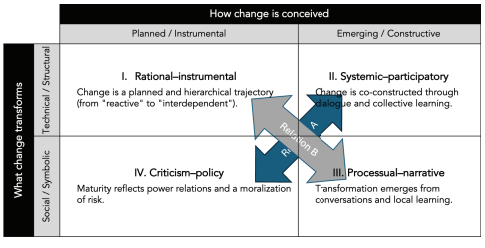


Figure 3. Mediation Pathways Between Power, Learning, Structure, and Meaning

Transformation stalls not because organizations lack tools or engagement, but because mediation follows the wrong path. What is missing is a direct mediation between power (quadrant IV) and learning (quadrant II), grounded in dialogue, inquiry, and reflexive leadership practices (relation A). Such a mediation creates the conditions under which structure can subsequently be reconnected to meaning (relation B), allowing audits, standards, and indicators to function as supports for collective interpretation rather than mere instruments of control. Without this double mediation, organizational change remains performative rather than transformative: activity increases, but epistemic progress remains limited.

5.3 Transformation as epistemic capability

These findings lead to a reframing of safety transformation. Transformation is not the sequential progression suggested by maturity models, nor the accumulation of procedures and indicators. It depends on the organization's capacity to connect structural coherence (standards, audits, KPIs) with epistemic openness — the ability to question and reinterpret how risk is understood.

Genuine transformation occurs when compliance infrastructures do not merely regulate behavior but function as learning devices. In such configurations, governance systems become mechanisms for inquiry rather than instruments of control. Authority supports reflection; metrics inform reinterpretation rather than simply validating performance.

From this perspective, safety maturity is not a level of structural sophistication but an epistemic capability: the organizational capacity to reconfigure mediation pathways between governance systems and collective sensemaking in response to experience. This explains why structural reinforcement alone often fails to produce durable change, and why leadership grounded in relational and interpretive practices is associated with sustained safety improvement (Li et al., 2026).

6 Conclusion

This paper advances a mediation-based explanatory model of safety transformation in large multinational organizations. Rather than interpreting stagnation in maturity programs as a failure of commitment or implementation, we identify a recurrent transformation failure mechanism (P1): when mediation between authority and learning is structurally indirect and routed primarily through compliance infrastructures, organizations systematically stabilize without achieving interpretive change.

Our findings show that structural reinforcement (audits, KPIs, standards) can enhance governance coherence and performance indicators without transforming how risk is collectively understood and enacted (P2). This explains why many maturity-based programs generate measurable progress while failing to alter the deeper regime of interpretation that shapes operational decision-making.

Sustained transformation therefore requires a sequential and recursive double mediation process (P3): direct mediation between authority and learning through reflexive practices, followed by the integration of emerging interpretations into durable structural systems. Without this dual movement, structural and interpretive dynamics remain weakly coupled, leading to plateau effects.

In this perspective, the proposed 2×2 matrix does not constitute a review of organizational change theories but an analytical and operational diagnostic framework (P4). It enables practitioners to identify specific stagnation configurations and to design targeted transformation roadmaps within complex risk governance systems.

Finally, safety maturity should be conceptualized not as a level of structural sophistication but as an epistemic capability (P5): the organizational capacity to reconfigure mediation pathways between governance systems and collective sensemaking in response to experience. Organizations do not transform because they measure better, but because they learn to restructure the relationship between authority, interpretation, and risk.

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