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# The Boston Foundation's Collaborate Boston Prize

Jennifer Aronson, M.B.A., Boston Foundation

*Keywords:* Collaboration, prize competition, community impact, place-based, resident leadership, community foundation

## Key Points

- This article describes how the Boston Foundation is leveraging Collaborate Boston, a competition launched in 2013, as a tool to support interorganizational and cross-sector collaboration in greater Boston to catalyze, surface, and implement ideas that have the potential to strengthen communities facing complex challenges.
- After a discussion of Collaborate Boston's theory of change and the prize design and process, the article shares early results from the inaugural 2013 competition, the foundation's reflections, and subsequent iterations for 2014 and beyond.
- The article concludes with an examination of the ways a prize can be a powerful tool for social change, and outlines specific recommendations for funders considering a prize mechanism to enhance their impact.

## Introduction

The last several years have seen an increase in the use of prizes to incentivize and support innovation in the philanthropic, private, and public sectors. Prizes can attract new players and fresh ideas, and are also an efficient and high-leverage tool in that the prize sponsor pays for only the most promising ideas.

McKinsey & Co. recommends that prizes should be part of the basic philanthropic toolkit, citing myriad ways they can produce change “not only by identifying new levels of excellence and

by encouraging specific innovations, but also by changing wider perceptions, improving the performance of communities of problem-solvers, building the skills of individuals, and mobilizing new talent or capital” (2009, p. 7).

While traditional grantmaking and community-engagement approaches continue to be the mainstays of philanthropic practice, prizes can bring a unique, complementary strategy to drive social change. A recent Deloitte University Press report distinguishes between a “push mechanism,” such as a grant, where the funder pays for the effort involved in delivering a program or service but retains the risk that expectations may not be met, versus the “pull mechanism” of a prize, where participants are rewarded for outputs such as ideas, pilots, and programs that meet predetermined specifications, effectively sharing the risk with the funder (Goldhammer, Mitchell, Parker, Anderson, & Joshi, 2014, p. 12).

The past several years have also seen increasing recognition of the complexity of persistent social challenges and the resultant need for a collaborative, cross-sector approach to address them. As John Kania & Mark Kramer (2011) so adeptly observe,

Despite the dominance of this approach, there is scant evidence that isolated initiatives are the best way to solve many social problems in today's complex and interdependent world. No single organiza-

tion is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it (p. 38-39).

The purpose of this article is to describe how the Boston Foundation is leveraging Collaborate Boston, a prize competition launched in 2013, as a tool to promote and support interorganizational and cross-sector collaboration in greater Boston to catalyze, surface, and implement ideas that have the potential to strengthen communities facing complex challenges. The article will explain the Collaborate Boston theory of change and will outline the prize design and process, and will share early results from the inaugural 2013 competition as well as the Boston Foundation's reflections and subsequent iterations for 2014 and beyond. It will conclude with the ways in which a prize can be a powerful tool for social change and outline specific recommendations for funders considering employing a prize mechanism to enhance their impact.

### Context

The Boston Foundation is a major grantmaker and also serves as a civic leader, think tank, and advocacy organization for greater Boston. As a community foundation, we think systemically about the place-based causes of and potential solutions to Boston's most pressing social challenges. We work to support what we term "thriving people and vibrant places" throughout greater Boston with a strategic focus on five programmatic areas, plus dedicated support to strengthen the effectiveness of the nonprofit sector overall.

The nonprofit-sector support work, which we refer to as "nonprofit effectiveness," includes a focus on collaboration. Although much has been written on the complexity involved in collaboration (Neuhoff, Smith Milway, Kiernan, & Grehan, 2014; Raynor, Cardona, Knowlton, Mittenthal, & Simpson, 2014), it is nonetheless a crucial part of making progress in addressing virtually every significant social challenge. As such, we have led and invested in several local efforts to support interorganizational collaboration, including the Massachusetts

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Nonprofit Network, the state's nonprofit trade group, which builds the sector's capacity for collective advocacy and action, and the Catalyst Fund for Nonprofits, a funder collaborative that provides technical support for organizations at varying stages of deep strategic collaborations and mergers ranging from feasibility to implementation.

The Boston Foundation's values statement reads, "In everything we do, we seek to broaden participation, foster collaboration, and heal racial, ethnic, and community divisions." In this spirit the foundation has recently added a focus on supporting and connecting with grassroots, resident leaders. In 2012 our Nonprofit Effectiveness Group was looking at ways to build on this burgeoning grassroots work in order to support and broaden our access to the rich ideas that exist within the communities we serve, but which philanthropy often has difficulty accessing via traditional grantmaking. At the same time, we recognized that the collaborations we were supporting were focused on nonprofit organizations and leaders but did not explicitly target the voices of resident leaders, nor those from the public or private sectors.

Launched in October 2013, Collaborate Boston builds on these strands of the Boston Foundation's rich history in that it is based on the dual premises that it will take all of us – working together across organizations, sectors, and other silos – to achieve the complex and lasting change we seek, and that

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some of the most powerful ideas about how to strengthen communities come from the residents of those communities.

#### **The Tool**

Collaborate Boston is an open, annual prize competition for community-led, cross-sector collaborative ideas that help push toward the

Boston Foundation's overarching vision of "thriving people and vibrant places" in greater Boston. Each prize cycle, \$100,000 in funding is awarded to the most promising collaborations focused on achieving specific outcomes for the people and places that make up our communities and that demonstrate strong resident leadership.

It is also a mechanism through which to elevate and support the foundation's priorities. While the emphasis on collaboration and resident leadership persists from year to year, the prize topic that applicants are asked to address changes with each cycle. The selection of the annual prize topic is informed by a scan of the top issues facing greater Boston at the time, conversations with external foundation stakeholders, and a cross-departmental brainstorming session that includes staff working with nonprofit organizations, policymakers, donors, civic and resident leaders, and the media.

Once the prize topic is announced, applicants are asked to design projects to help contribute to it. Applicants are not individual organizations, but teams of three or more partners representing at least two of the three major sectors that the foundation has engaged with for many years: business, nonprofit, and government. Additionally, we make clear that collaborations with strong resident voice and leadership will be given preference. We ask applicants to determine their own outcomes and describe how their activities will lead to those results. A cross-sector advisory group helps select the winners.

#### *Outreach and Application Processes*

While the framing and design of the prize is one important component of success, the prize process is perhaps equally significant in realizing our goals. Given that we are interested in connecting with what we have come to refer to as "the un-usual suspects," and recognizing that traditional grant-application mechanisms such as RFPs and outreach strategies such as sector e-newsletters and website postings have specific and limited reach, we designed an outreach strategy that includes hosting an open information session, attending and making announcements at community meetings, and

FIGURE 1 Collaborate Boston 2013 Outreach Flyer

Do you have an idea about **how to improve the lives and futures** of black & brown boys and young men living in Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan?

Do you want to **work with your community to make it happen?**



We want to support you with up to **\$100,000 in grants and technical assistance!**

Learn more at [www.collaborateboston.org](http://www.collaborateboston.org).

We will be accepting applications from November 1 to December 6, 2012.

Contact us!  
Liz Doolittle

Boston Foundation Program Associate  
Elizabeth.Doolittle@tbf.org 617.338.2295

# Collaborate Boston

**About Collaborate Boston**

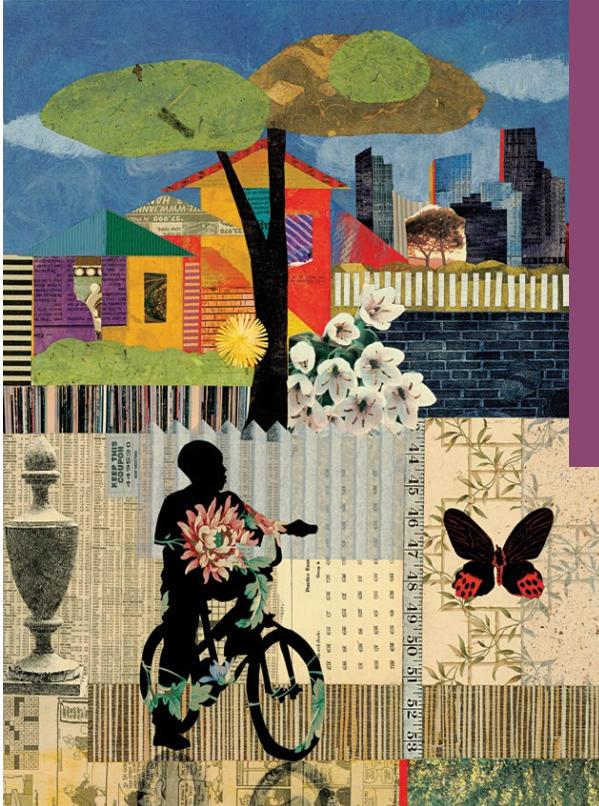
Collaborate Boston is an incentive-driven competition of the Boston Foundation that elevates and supports the collaborative efforts we believe are critical to creating thriving people and vibrant places in our community. Each year \$100,000 in grants and technical assistance will be awarded to collaborations focused on achieving specific outcomes for the people and/or the places that make up our community. The outcomes will be announced at the start of each competition. For the first year, 2012, the focus will be on improving the lives and futures of black & brown boys and young men, ages 9-15, living in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan.



FIGURE 2 Collaborate Boston 2014 Outreach Flyer

Do you live in Dorchester, Hyde Park, Mattapan or Roxbury and have an idea about how to strengthen your neighborhood?

Do you want to work with your community to make it happen?



We want to support you with \$25,000 in funding!

Learn more at [www.collaborateboston.org](http://www.collaborateboston.org).

We will be accepting applications from February 18 to March 28, 2014.

Have questions? Contact us!

Stephanie Guidry  
Boston Foundation Program Associate  
[Stephanie.Guidry@tbf.org](mailto:Stephanie.Guidry@tbf.org)  
617-338-4508

**Information Session:**

February 25th, 6:00 p.m. at the Boston Foundation, 75 Arlington Street, Boston, MA 02116

# Collaborate Boston

**Collaborate Boston** is a Boston Foundation competition that supports the collaborative efforts we believe are critical to creating thriving people and vibrant places. Each year, \$100,000 in funding is awarded to collaborations focused on achieving specific outcomes for our community. This year, four \$25,000 grants will be made for collaborations designed to strengthen neighborhoods in Dorchester, Hyde Park, Mattapan and/or Roxbury, with preference given to neighborhoods along the Fairmount Corridor. A neighborhood can be as small as one block or as large as you would like to define it.



Artwork courtesy of Ekua Holmes, "Summer of '62" ©2014

distributing flyers and posters to community centers, housing developments, libraries, local businesses, and health centers in the neighborhoods where the prize is focused. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2.)

Given what we know about the time-consuming nature of collaboration and the fact that we want to attract leaders and organizations that don't necessarily have the experience or capacity to complete our full grant-application forms, we designed a two-phased process that features a dramatically pared down initial application consisting of just six core questions. (See Figure 3.) We make the application available via simple online software that allows applicants to submit nontraditional videos and images as part of their application. Applicants have access to unlimited technical assistance from our staff throughout the application period, which many take advantage of to gain clarity about the prize structure, eligibility criteria, and application questions.

All prize finalists are asked to submit additional information related to the implementation of their ideas, including a budget, and are invited for 90-minute interviews with foundation staff and members of the advisory committee to further discuss their idea, their implementation plan, and how they plan to work together to achieve and monitor success. Despite our best efforts to eliminate the process and structural components that can impede communication, we have found that foundation/grantseeker power dynamics persist. To combat this, we openly acknowledge it and involve the finalists in our efforts to put everyone at ease during the interviews so that we can collectively focus on the potential impact of the ideas.

#### *Advisory Committee*

We work closely with a 12-member, cross-sector advisory committee comprised of a diverse group of leaders from a variety of organizations, neighborhoods, and perspectives. This committee reviews the initial applications with us and helps identify the finalists and the winners.

During the review process we ask the advisory

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committee to consider a variety of factors in assessing applicant ideas, including alignment of the idea with the prize focus, the clarity of the role of each partner, the potential for impact, the strength of resident leadership, and the strength of the collaboration. Deliberations take place over two four-hour, in-person, committee review discussions and are informed by aggregated information from and analysis of formal scoring rubrics that advisory committee members and

FIGURE 3 Collaborate Boston 2014 Core Application Questions

1. **Project Title:** Please provide a name for your collaboration's project idea.
2. **Neighborhood and Issue:** Please answer the following questions (200 words or less for both questions):
  - *What neighborhood is your collaboration focused in? "Neighborhood" can be as small as one block or as large as you would like to define it.*
  - *What issue or challenge does your collaboration aim to address?*
3. **Idea:** Please answer the following question (200 words or less): *What is your collaboration's idea for how to strengthen your neighborhood?*
4. **Impact:** Please answer the following question (100 words or less): *How will your neighborhood be different if your project succeeds?*
5. **Role of Collaboration:** Please answer the following question (100 words or less): *How will collaboration help you achieve your goals?*
6. **Role of Prize:** Please answer the following question (200 words or less): *How would a \$25,000 Collaborate Boston prize better enable your collaboration to strengthen your neighborhood?*
7. **Project Team Partners and Roles:** Please complete the following:
  - *Enter the names and organization of each of the partners in this application.*
  - *Briefly describe each partner's role in the project (100 words or less per partner).*
8. **Video URL (optional):** You may submit a link to a video (3 minutes or less) outlining your idea or any additional information you would like for the selection committee to know about your collaboration.

staff complete for each application prior to the meetings.

### 2013 Results

The inaugural 2013 Collaborate Boston competition focused on improving the lives and outcomes of black and brown boys and young men living in Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan, three of Boston's inner-city neighborhoods that experience disproportionate levels of inequality across a variety of indicators ranging from education and health to public safety and

economic opportunity. Two \$50,000 prizes were awarded to new collaborative efforts determined by the Collaborate Boston advisory committee and Boston Foundation staff to be the most promising.

To better understand Collaborate Boston's impact and inform our planning, we engaged an external evaluator to assess the 2013 competition process and winning projects. The goal of the evaluation was two-pronged. First, we wished to learn if and how the competition encouraged or catalyzed

### 2013 Winner Case Study: Black and Brown Boys at the STEM of Success

The Collaborate Boston 2013 winner, Black and Brown Boys at the STEM of Success, focused on a widely acknowledged challenge: Students identified by the Boston Public Schools Achievement Gap Office have a higher risk of dropping out of school than the rest of Boston's students. The proposed solution was to give these students a fun reason to stay engaged: robotics teams. The idea was that these robotics teams would leverage the competitive spirit that exists in many school-age boys, engage these students in a common goal, and teach them skills transferable to employment in the growing technology sector.

A unique collaboration among the Latino STEM Alliance, the Center for STEM education at Northeastern University, and the Boston Public Schools Achievement Gap Office, partners who had not formally worked together before, worked to engage, inspire, and boost academic achievement for male students ages 10-14 by creating eight after-school robotics teams.

The teams gave these students a new avenue for focused learning, most meeting once a week for an hour and a half after school to learn the basics of robotics, how to build robots, and programming skills. The collaborative team's efforts culminated in a multischool, tournament-style robotics competition. Deep engagement was evident at the competition, where students and their friends and families cheered each other on with a passion that rivaled that coming from basketball fans at the other end of the gymnasium where the competition was held.

Anecdotal evidence showed that the project deepened participants' understanding of STEM – the academic disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and student survey results point to improvement in participants' abilities to work as part of a team. The partners continue to collaborate even after the end of the Collaborate Boston-funded project, expanding the program to include girls and serving schools in additional geographic areas through the support of additional funders.

interorganizational and cross-sector collaboration. Second, we sought to understand if and how the two winners achieved the outcomes they had identified when their projects began.

The evaluation included a series of in-depth interviews with the winning teams to understand the inner workings of their collaborations and assess the winning projects' successes and challenges. Nonwinning finalists were also surveyed to learn more about their experience with the competition process and the impact of the process on their longer-term collaborative efforts. The evaluator also interviewed several advisory committee members about their experience and perspective on the prize process and winners.

Although the evaluator's report is still forthcoming, early findings indicate that Collaborate Boston generated new ideas, mobilized action across sectors, and inspired collaboration and community change (Third Sector New England, 2015). The evaluator noted in early findings that the prize design "encouraged collaboration right from the start, expanding Collaborate Boston's influence beyond the prizewinners to applicants as well" (Third Sector New England, 2015).

Because our primary aspiration for Collaborate Boston is that it will result in the growth and expansion of cross-sector, interorganizational collaboration, we are pleased with these initial findings. However, it should be noted that

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sustainability for the winning collaborations is not the goal of Collaborate Boston. While we are developing a mechanism to attract additional funding for the winning projects from the broader philanthropic community, we recognize that the specific winning ideas may or may not continue. Rather, our hope is that the prize will result in long-term collaborative relationships that generate a variety of impactful efforts that continue beyond the prize period.

### The 2014 Prize

The 2014 Collaborate Boston competition topic was designed to surface and support resident-led ideas to strengthen the neighborhoods along the newly reopened Fairmount Indigo transit line that now connects and provides service to four historically underinvested Boston neighborhoods. Four \$25,000 prizes were awarded in November 2014 to collaboration teams seeking to address a cross-section of neighborhood issues, including the arts, the environment, food and public health, and improving the outcomes of men of color.

As a result of active staff reflection on stakeholder feedback and the in-process external evaluation from the prize's first year, the 2014 Collaborate Boston prize design and process benefitted from three significant iterations on the 2013 inaugural prize:

1. *Prize structure.* In the first year of Collaborate Boston we announced a \$100,000 prize pool but, in an effort to be flexible and open to applicant ideas and vision, we did not predetermine the number or amount of the prizes. This had the unintended consequence of fueling unrealistic expectations for the finalists, most of whom expected to receive the full prize award, and caused confusion for the advisory committee in determining how best to assess and award the prizes. In 2014, we refined our process and announced that four \$25,000 prizes would be awarded, so that applicants could more easily scope their ideas and plan for implementation.
2. *Outreach.* For the competition's first year, we focused on casting the widest possible net via outreach to greater Boston organizations and leaders about the new prize. While this strategy resulted in an impressive number of applicants – 71, from which 12 finalists were selected – many of the applications lacked authentic collaborative efforts and resident leadership. We found that this was often the result of resourceful grantwriters assembling collaborations that appeared to be interesting on paper, but did not stand up during the interview phase. In 2014, therefore, we created a more targeted strategy that focused on outreach to resident community leaders. It produced a smaller but stronger pool of 31 applicants, from which 11 finalists were selected.
3. *Showcase.* Collaborate Boston is not designed to provide multiyear support for the winners, but rather to catalyze and support interorganizational, cross-sector collaboration in a variety of forms. At the same time, we do recognize and acknowledge that none of the issues identified as the focus for the Collaborate Boston prize can be solved in a single year or with

## 2014 Collaborate Boston Winner Descriptions

- *The Fairmount Arts Collaboration* aims to create an economic- and education-focused intervention in Hyde Park's Logan Square by engaging the community, including local students, in visual and theater arts coupled with support for local restaurants and businesses. These efforts will encourage patrons to visit the area and local businesses regularly, and the ultimate goal is to have the area designated an Avenue of the Arts by the city of Boston. The collaboration is a partnership among Franklin D. Roosevelt School, Hyde Park Main Streets, and Riverside Theater Works.
- *Fields Corner Shines* aims to engage and connect youth from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds living in the Fields Corner neighborhood by launching a youth environmental club, through which local teens will lead neighborhood cleanup and beautification efforts while creating campaigns to engage others in keeping the community clean. The collaboration is a partnership among Viet-AID, BCYF Cleveland Community Center, GreenDorchester, and Fields Corner Main Street.
- *Seeds of Change Bulk Food Buy-In Market* will launch a "buy-in club," where individuals come together to purchase food items collectively from local farms and wholesale distributors. The project will train residents along the Fairmont Corridor with the skills necessary to create and coordinate the clubs, ultimately saving them money and increasing access to healthy foods. The collaboration is a partnership among City Growers, Family Independence Initiative, and Seeds of Change.
- *Breakfast IV Brothers* seeks to support and expand a breakfast series that aims to strengthen community among men of color through a group mentorship model with cross-generational dialogue and relationship building. The collaboration is a partnership among Body Snatchers Ministries Inc., Mattahunt Community Center/Wheelock College, and M.O.V.E. at Morning Star Baptist Church.

the relatively limited prize dollars available. In May 2013, therefore, we held a showcase event at the beginning of the prize period with the goal of connecting the newly announced winners to other funders and donors for potential co-investment and longer-term funding opportunities. While the showcase was well attended, we were unable to credit it with direct additional support for either of the winning collaborations, and thus decided to shift the timing of the showcase for future years. The showcase will take place at the end of the one-year prize period, and will feature the results of the prior year's winners and the announcement of the new winners.

We are constantly revisiting whether and how the Collaborate Boston prize tool is achieving its goals to strengthen communities by encouraging and supporting resident-led, cross-sector collaboration. As such, we continue to actively reflect on and solicit input from a range of stakeholders, including the prize finalists and winners, the advisory committee, an external evaluator, and foundation staff.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the Boston Foundation is pleased with these early results and the progress being made as we continue to invest in and develop the prize tool. Collaborate Boston appears to generate excitement and act as a catalyst for

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collaboration around solutions to some of the most complex challenges facing our communities. Importantly, it has also allowed us to connect with organizations and leaders that we would not otherwise have engaged with in the course of our regular grantmaking activities. More broadly, it is an important strategy to communicate the foundation's belief that collaboration and resident leadership are critical components of social change.

We have learned many lessons in the competition's first two years related to prize process and structure. We offer funders considering introducing a prize into their practice three key recommendations about how to leverage what is powerful and unique about prizes:

1. Create low barriers to entry. One of the most powerful features of prize competitions is the ability to cast a wide net. A well-designed prize process will eliminate traditional and often cumbersome grantmaking formalities, allowing the applicants' core ideas to rise to the surface. Throughout both the 2013 and 2014 Collaborate Boston application processes, we received confirmation that it works well to keep the initial application as brief as possible to attract ideas from a wide array of applicants, including, most importantly for us perhaps, grassroots resident leaders who may be unfamiliar with traditional grant-application processes. This orientation often requires that the funder be more flexible, open, and active in receiving and interpreting submissions, but we feel that the additional effort is rewarded handsomely with the innovative and unique quality of the ideas submitted.
2. Leverage the prize platform to raise awareness. Prizes are great vehicles for influencing behaviors and raising awareness of important issues, including among those outside the relatively small group of winners. Because a core goal of Collaborate Boston is to encourage collaboration more broadly and share strong examples of collaborative ideas and approaches, we have implemented an open, online application tool where all finalist applications are posted and through which the public is encouraged to read and comment. It is also noteworthy that in the three years since Collaborate Boston was launched, the Boston Foundation has implemented initiatives that leverage various elements of the prize structure to elevate its priorities in the areas of arts, education, and at the intersection of health and housing.
3. Plan to dedicate significant staff time to work with applicants throughout the process. The 2013 and 2014 Collaborate Boston prize competitions employed a streamlined initial application process to attract leaders and organizations unfamiliar with traditional grantmaking approaches. Even so, additional ongoing support was crucial to inclusive applicant participation. Therefore, we invested significant staff time in the process design and providing one-on-one technical assistance to assist potential applicants in understanding the prize's goals, structure, criteria, and online application tool. We also elected to meet with each finalist group individually (11 to 12 finalists per year) for 90-minute, in-person interviews – a time-consuming endeavor, but one that provided key insights into applicants' intrateam-collaboration dynamics and

implementation plans, both crucial factors in selecting the winners. Over the nine-month prize processes, two staff members dedicated a significant portion of their time to designing and managing the competition and working with applicants.

While Collaborate Boston is focused on creating change for greater Boston neighborhoods via resident-led, cross-sector collaborations, we believe that the prize structure has great potential for replication among virtually all funders wishing to identify a range of promising, impactful ideas. The addition of a prize to traditional grantmaking and community-outreach strategies can be a powerful funder tool in the service of social change.

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