



Going deeper into meetings

2: People issues

A41 Articles series: Structures

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Meetings! For many people the idea of a church business meeting brings about a fair amount of despair. They are often not happy occasions: they can be dull, bad tempered or just plain frustrating.

Some waste time with trivial business, others are filled with trivial discussion on legitimate items. They often involve a great deal of people-time for surprisingly little output.

But good meetings, when they take place, can be a real joy with a sense of purpose, of working together and with positive outcomes.

Official gatherings of a Church Council, Kirk Session, Diaconate, Select Vestry, Trustees, Finance Team, or whatever should be positive, effective, Christ-centred, enjoyable occasions. It's worth studying the subject and seeking to make church business meetings work well.

The idea of this double-article (A40 and A41), though each part stands on its own, is to move beyond the basics of meetings, such as agendas, minutes and seating arrangements, to think about some new ways of creating effective business gatherings.

Part 1, in A40 accessed [here](#), looks at three planning issues that may be new to you:

- 1 Plan the year
- 2 Think three tenses
- 3 Welcome review.

Part 2, in A41, this article, covers three people issues:

- 4 Keep it small
- 5 Watch the context
- 6 Play like a team.

If you already know the basics of good meetings, here are six ideas to stretch your mind.

4: Keep it small

Many meetings struggle for the simple reason that the group is too big. Have in mind a church council or equivalent body of no more than 12-15, a leadership group of no more than six or seven, and a committee responsible for one specific area of church life or an event of no more than three or four.

1: Advantages

There is a range of impressive plus-points for limiting the number of people on a group and so at decision-making meetings. Here are seven.

- 1 Teams do not work with large numbers (over 15, say, although the best teams are usually six to nine). So teamworking gets much harder if you add a few people to the group. The number of relationships within a group goes up much faster than the number of members as that increases. You need small numbers for good teamwork. See section 6 of this Article for more on this.
- 2 With smaller numbers you cannot have passengers: everyone should feel they are valued and have real ownership of the group's task. This gives a higher level of motivation and enthusiasm for sharp but wise decision-making.
- 3 There should be clearer focus on the purpose and vision; the group can operate at a greater speed than a larger body.
- 4 By keeping groups small you save people-time which might be better invested in ministry rather than in discussion.
- 5 There is a greater ability to maintain right confidences.
- 6 Members get to know each other well which increases understanding and trust. The leader has a closer relationship with each member than in a larger group.
- 7 As a result of all this, meetings are more enjoyable and effective and because of that you have greater group commitment.

All this points to an effectiveness through simplification of organisation and structure, less waste of time and a real commitment to make meetings work.

2: Dangers

That does not mean that there are not dangers in any movement to smaller decision-making groups. Here are seven pitfalls to be aware of.

- 1 Smaller numbers may give less breadth of expertise, whether in terms of experience, skills or theological understanding.
- 2 There might also be a weaker representation of the wider population of the church's membership.
- 3 When trying to imagine new ideas, there may be less innovative thinking or identification of issues (although the opposite can also be true).
- 4 If the aim of speeding up action is met, the group could take decisions too hastily without pausing for sufficient time to think through the implications.
- 5 If people miss meetings, the number meeting is smaller still.
- 6 With smaller numbers one person seeking to disrupt in any way can have a greater impact.
- 7 The perception of those outside the group may be of people holding too much power whose decisions cannot be trusted.

Large groups are safer than smaller ones in that they are less likely to make rash decisions and more likely to maintain the status quo.

But churches that are growing and thriving today are the ones that take risks – and the Gospels hardly point to a Christian community that lives in safety mode. Provided there is recognition and understanding of the dangers, the advantages are much greater than the potential difficulties which can, in any case, be guarded against.

3: Changed practices

If you move to smaller groups here are some ideas which you may need to rethink from what you are used to.

Language

The word 'committee' can usefully be discarded for all church groups, simply because it gives the idea of discussion rather than action. But when groups are small this becomes even more apparent. 'Working group', 'Action group', '... team' are all possible ideas to use.

Documents for meetings

Agendas may still be important (depending on the type of meeting) because, if constructed well, they provide the road-map for the meeting. But for small one-topic groups such as ad hoc groups, the idea of formal minutes may be rather too much.

In these cases aim for, if possible, no more than one side of A4 in bullet-point format listing actions agreed and who is responsible and by when. The aim should be to get this out within 24 hours of the meeting.

Communication and accountability

Small groups should first be accountable to a higher body, to ensure they do not use their freedom in unwise directions. The role of the higher level group is to set the parameters in which the small group will operate (purpose, scope, etc.) and monitor these. The role of the group itself is to communicate well with their parent: sharing the one-sided A4 sheet mentioned above as soon as it is produced.

But the small group needs to keep in touch with the whole church too through some appropriate means of communication (a crisp, oral report the next Sunday, for example) so that it does not come across as a secret forum which people know exists but whose business remains cloaked in mystery.

Flexibility and informality

A group of three can meet for 30 minutes after church on a Sunday to save having to take up a weeknight evening. Business can be conducted on an almost continuous basis week by week, using email, text and phone calls to keep in touch. This is a different approach from the full agenda of a focused meeting every other month.

Specialists

Small groups can thrive when they invite in a specialist to give input on certain topics. Such specialisms may be in technical matters, representational views, or theological insight. The specialists are not members of the team, but invited guests for all or part of a specific meeting. This distinction is important or you lose the team concept.

Risk-taking

We need to move away from structures that promote utter safety – often ensuring that no change takes place after a considerable amount of discussion. But the concept of maintaining the status quo and not hurting anyone by changing something is deeply embedded in the DNA of many churches. Christian discipleship involves an openness to danger. Our structures need to do far more to reflect this.

4: Limited life

As well as keeping groups small it can help to give as many as possible a limited lifespan. If groups are set up with clear 'use by' dates attached to them, this prevents purposes becoming clouded with the passing of time and keeps the whole structure fresh.

This will not be possible with key councils or something like a finance group (where clear and probably limited expertise is called for). But it works well with groups linked to specific events or projects.

Give them a self-destruct date and stick to it. It focuses the mind well and stops people hogging memberships as a badge of respectability.

This point extends to making the *norm* to have ad hoc, limited-life groups rather than permanent bodies.

5: Making it work**The danger of spread**

Be aware that the idea of small decision-making groups is not mainstream in many churches and so, even if this concept is introduced, the tendency will be for each group to grow.

This may happen in a number of possible ways:

- People will suggest the names of those who might have a valuable contribution to make (which may well be true).
- Someone will point out that if A and B are members it would be a good idea to have P and Q as well to balance the group for (take your pick of) theological viewpoint, age/gender, views on this issue, and so on.
- Someone will point out that a small group is not representative enough of different groups within the church.
- Strong characters will seek to engineer themselves a place on the group.

In a church many people are happy to serve on decision-making groups because it gives them standing in the church or because it lets them off having to serve in more demanding ways. Being a member of the Evangelism Committee can, sadly, be a let-off for doing the work of evangelism.

So if you agree with the principle of smaller groups, you will need to defend the idea with vigour. Resist the inevitable attack – but be ready for it first.

Example: ad hoc group

To make these ideas work, first ensure the group has a crystal-clear purpose and well-defined terms of reference. Then find three or four people who are enthusiastic for the outcomes you are looking for. Ensure one of them can be trusted to co-ordinate the group with drive. Make their accountability clear, give them dates to report by and tell them they will be trusted to deliver on time. Their findings will be taken seriously, but the senior group will not rework the discussions the group have had.

Talk to the leader about these outcomes but give him or her permission to work out how best to let the group function and who else they might consult. Some meetings might be after church on a Sunday, some more formal at a time and day of week to suit the group, but much of the day-to-day work can be done by email and one-to-ones provided the whole group stays closely in touch with each other.

After delivery on time, thank the group in any tangible way and, resisting all calls for it to continue, disband it forthwith.

Example: PCC

I will take this as an example of a denominational and official body where there are rules that have to be adhered to. For non-Anglicans you will need to apply this section in a way that is appropriate for your legislative systems.

- 1 Forget what the standard texts expect (that the larger the church the larger the number of elected members on the PCC) and seek to have a maximum of six or nine elected members. To effect a change you will need to do this via the APCM and it only comes into force the year after the decision is taken. That's sad.
- 2 Ensure Readers/LLMs do not have ex officio places on the PCC. The APCM takes this decision. They can stand for election in the normal way.
- 3 Ask your synod reps (if more than one) to have a *voluntary* arrangement (it cannot be anything other than voluntary) that one of their number will be their nominated PCC attender and no other rep will attend meetings except in exceptional cases. All have to receive paperwork and the one will report back on meetings to the others.
- 4 Try to avoid any co-options if possible, and ensure that you do not have people other than those already listed, Wardens and licensed clergy on the Council (some churches have deputy Wardens on through some sort of tradition).
- 5 Avoid appointing paid staff to the Council (it is not illegal provided you declare it properly, but is a dubious practice because the Council employs the staff). They can be 'in attendance' if they are needed for specific business.

5: Watch the context

Having reduced your numbers, here now are six features that should support any business meeting for churches but which are often overlooked, presumably because they are thought to be unimportant or even irrelevant. All have a people aspect to them: venue, space, equipment, layout, timing, faith.

1: Venue

The place where you gather has an impact on the mood and therefore the effectiveness of any business meeting. It is worth considering this point both for your regular meetings and then for your specials. Here are five points to consider when choosing where you will hold your meeting.

- **History**

It may be that past meetings of the group have not been good and a return to the same venue brings back unhappy

memories. Or if groups representing two churches are meeting together, the host venue can give unhelpful messages about which group is the leading one. Check out if the venue 'says' anything unhelpful (or positive!) to any sub-groups within those that are meeting.

- **Home or away**

If you normally meet at base, an away-meeting can encourage clear thinking and new ideas, so it may be helpful to have a

change for special meetings. Don't assume, however, that regular meetings should always be in the same place.

- **Secular or sacred**

It is worth considering whether there is any difference between a meeting at a 'holy' site (such as a church) and in a more neutral building with no specifically church connections. For example, would an away-meeting at a Christian retreat-house differ in any way from the same meeting in a secular conference centre?

- **Travel**

It's always worth checking who on the group might have travel difficulties for the venue chosen. Even if you gather at your church, some may have to rely on public transport and others may have difficulty with parking. You don't want people walking in feeling tired, tense or frustrated, nor arriving late.

- **Distractions**

I once joined a church group meeting in West London under the flightpath for Heathrow Airport. It was a hot summer's evening so the windows had to be open. Enough said.

2: Space

It's not just the venue that matters. The space used for the meeting within the venue is also important as is the ambience created. You might, for example, consider the differences for a group of ten people meeting in someone's lounge with an open fire compared with meeting in the same house on hard-backed chairs round a table. Here are four points to consider.

- **Size**

What matters is the size of the space relative to the number of people meeting. A meeting in a large church hall with a few chairs in one area is going to feel very different from the same group getting together in someone's sitting room. Ceiling height and the enclosed area available (depending on seating layout – see point 4 below) affect the meeting. Both these possible spaces could create problems. What might they be?

- **Lighting, temperature and décor**

A meeting in a space that comes across as 'cold' (not just physically) will have a different feel from one where there is colour and comfort. If people are to focus on the business and the group itself, they

need to be helped by the feel of the space. For example, both the provision of natural lighting (or lack of it) and the view outside the windows can impact the quality of creative thinking.

- **Seating comfort**

No human bottom is designed to sit still on a comfortable chair for more than two hours (some would say a lot less). If the chair is uncomfortable, this time is considerably reduced. Don't forget that older members may feel this more than others. Breaks in a long meeting are vital.

- **Audibility**

The size and acoustics of the room affect how hard people need to concentrate to be able to hear each other with ease. Seating layout (again, see point 4 below) also plays a part in this.

3: Equipment

It is worth thinking carefully about what equipment and furniture would enable the meeting to be more effective. Many meetings demand hi-tech equipment in the form of laptop, data projector and screen these days. I hold that a lo-tech flipchart is still a great meetings tool.

Here are four points to take into account.

- **Hi-tech**

If someone is making a data projection presentation nothing is worse than time wasted sorting out the connections and the PowerPoint file. Get it all properly prepared before the meeting begins and the tech can then be a servant rather than take the meeting over.

- **Information sources**

We are moving towards meeting papers being available on Dropbox or Google Docs rather than circulated in hard copy form. So it matters what each member has available in terms of IT equipment and software. Take careful thought for those who do not have their own computer and who do not work in an IT environment.

- **Lo-tech**

A flipchart or whiteboard with appropriate pens can be really useful for recording ideas, summarising a discussion or wording a resolution. Have one ready with a scribe who can write well. Use it at any appropriate point in the meeting. People who wish to can then use their smartphones to photograph the sheets.

- **Tables**

Some meetings may expect people to have their own laptop or tablet rather than paperwork. This has implications for tables. Any meeting with papers also benefits from tables for people to meet around. What other furniture will you require?

4: Layout

Many meetings stick with one standard seating layout – not always a helpful one. For options see Training Notes TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, in the Resources section of this website.

Whether going for straight or arced theatre style, a horseshoe or circle, boardroom or groups, keep in mind the following points.

- **Formality**

Anything straight is more formal than an arrangement that is curved. Some meetings need formality, some do not. Most meetings of a committee size can be helped with curved lines to the seating. As already noted, seating around tables can be helpful but introduces more formality.

- **Sight lines**

It can be important that everyone can see everyone else – this is not possible in some layouts. Some seating plans offer the possibility of people hiding or holding sub-meetings in small groups. What is vital is that the Chair can see everyone.

- **Hierarchy**

Some layouts give certain people (such as the Chair) an obvious position of power, whereas others speak more of group equality. You may need both these at different points in a single meeting. The traditional layout of rows of chairs for delegates in front of a table for the Chair creates different levels of control which may not always be helpful.

- **Tables**

These are important for papers and equipment (see point 3 above) but their positioning also sends messages about protection v openness and about hierarchy.

Once you have realised how important the layout is, you can watch for human behaviour as people join a meeting. Who sits behind the protection of a table? Who sit together in the back row out of sight of the Chair? Who puts themselves next to the leader of the group?

5: Timing

There are many aspects of time to consider. The trouble is that most groups fall into one pattern and fail to question whether this is the ideal one – or the only possible one. A change of time can in itself have a significant impact on a group who meet. Here are six points to ponder.

- **Length of meeting**

Many meetings are too long – well beyond the members' attention span. Consider a refreshment break at the mid-point instead of the start, and the need to keep time short if of an evening and people have come straight from a hard day's work, perhaps without a meal.

- **Refreshments**

Talking of refreshments, consider what a coffee break can do to a meeting – if the coffee is good quality. What about bottles of water on the tables and glasses, not plastic cups?

- **Day and time**

It is difficult for a church to find a day and time that will suit everyone so a midweek evening is the norm. Some have experimented with Sundays, but this cuts into what should be a family day. One option worth exploring is a Saturday breakfast time. It means people have to get up early but does not take away too much of the main part of the day.

- **Administration**

Church groups are not always good at getting all the necessary preparation materials out on time (eg. a full week before the meeting). Or the minutes out within a few days of the event, rather than just before the next meeting. The timing of necessary paperwork is important for the group to function well.

- **Preparation**

Meetings where people have failed to prepare properly waste much time. There are elements of discipline and responsibility here. However not everyone takes information in from print that well, and some rely on the interaction of a meeting to understand an issue.

- **Continuous time**

If you see the group as a team (see section 6 below) then you stop thinking about meetings as the focus for everything and consider them as special events in a team that exists 24/7. This gives everyone a different feel of time.

6: Faith

For church meetings there has to be a spiritual dimension too, more than just a brief prayer at start and end. This is God's business you are dealing with, even (especially!) if it is the Finance Committee. Here are five points to consider.

- **Prayer**

What part does prayer play on the agenda, at other points in the meeting, in the lives of the team for the meeting, and in the life of the church for the meeting? Some church groups just have a formal prayer to open and the Grace at the end. How can you show that the whole meeting is conducted in the presence of Christ?

- **Theological input**

Any church handling a weighty agenda needs help with understanding how this sits in a theological perspective. So it might be an idea to appoint an official theologian for the group. It can be so helpful to understand, for key items of business, how they fit into your understanding of discipleship and the Church itself.

- **Bible**

Some church groups read a Bible passage at key meetings. You need to choose a passage that is of direct relevance to the business that day, and then ponder on it to see what you can learn in how to tackle the issues.

- **Personal faith**

1 Timothy 3:13 makes it clear that practical service in church is tightly bound up with growth in faith. Could your business meetings become means of grace for everyone who attends? It is a neglected point but one well worth pondering.

- **Dangers**

There are however dangers in all this. I have heard a prayer used as a tool to make a point the speaker wishes to underline, some people can come across as almost saying God is on their side of the argument, and conflict can be unhelpfully smothered by a call for silent meditation.

Getting these, and other points right is important. If ten people meet for two and a half hours, you have used up 25 hours of people time. Double that to include preparation and action, agenda work and minute recording. Is that input of people-resource resulting in quality output and wise decision-making for change? If so that is fine. If not, you are in danger of misusing your human resources.

Let's make church business meetings attractive, beautiful for God. That means considering these topics as well as the 'normal' areas of agenda setting, chairing and minute-taking.

6: Play like a team

Too many groups – committees, councils, boards or whatever – start their thinking with the dominant idea of the business to be conducted at meetings. That leads to issues of structure and order, all of which are important. But this starting point affects all subsequent thinking. This is a task-centred (and very male!) approach.

Let's start from a different place: the people who make up this so-called committee or business group. They have a job to do and they are to do it together, so the idea of a team would seem to be ideal.

Instead of the concept of business meetings with agendas to get through, start your thinking with a team of human beings who make up this group. You are still covering the same ground, there is still business to be done of course, but your starting point is different and so your subsequent attitude will change.

Two objections

There are two important objections that people make. First, teams are usually hand-picked, they are SElected. Many business groups, on the other hand, are Elected. There is only one letter different in those two words, but the ideas are clearly distinguished.

A purist would then argue that an elected group cannot be a team. Well, perhaps. But they can and should learn to work like a team. They can still be team-like.

The second objection is that so-called teams are often pretty dysfunctional. But consider what a *good* team should be like – ignore the bad practices you will be aware of as it is all too easy to use the word ‘team’ too freely. See also Article A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, and its third section, on this website.

Here are nine statements about (good) teams. How might each of these help you see your business meetings through a different lens?

1: Teams exist 24/7

A team has an ongoing life. It is something you ‘belong’ to. Traditional thinking about a committee sees it as meetings to attend – a very different idea. A team meets of course but the ongoing life means that the team develops outside its meetings as well as within them. It is primarily a human entity, not a task to be completed.

So a business group that plays as a team expects to do much of its work outside its meetings. Meetings are key events in the life of the team, but not the centre of their being. Group members will use the 24 hours in each day to get to know other members, to discuss the team task with them and together to action what has been agreed. They ‘belong’.

2: Teams are committed to their task

A team has a team-task, something everyone is committed to even though each person will play a different role in helping to achieve it. A sports team plays to win the match – and the series. It is clear what they have to do.

Compare that with many committees who exist only to get through an agenda for the next meeting. Team thinking here will help the group define exactly what, together, they are seeking to achieve. The word ‘together’ is what matters. This is a group activity not a set of conflicting ideas for each member. This is the purpose of the team and it needs to be clearly defined and understood so everyone is playing for that result.

3: Teams focus on the future

The team task is to get to a future point with success. The sales team is there to increase the business. There may be targets to meet as part of a future outcome they are working towards

Article A40 section 2 covered the importance of the future tense so that everything moves towards that. Having a team approach will enable everyone to achieve an outcome for the year, rather than just to attend meetings as

though these existed for the sake of themselves. A future focus gives motivation for action and, where necessary, change.

4: Teams agree on their way of working

Although there can be, and should be, a wide range of personalities on a team, the members have to agree a certain way of working and then fit into that if the team is to function well. Team A may act in a formal way, but Team B has a laid-back attitude. Team C is always cautious, while Team D takes risks.

Church business groups that focus on agendas have little time for such thinking. But there can be great value in seeking to come to a common mind on the style in which the team is to operate. This may well depend on the leader but some of it will reflect past history and much of it will depend on the culture of the wider church that the team is part of. If there is agreement over style of operation, there can be constructive progress instead of hurtful conflict.

5: Teams stay small

As already covered in section 4, if teams are to play well they cannot be large in their number of members. In sport the maximum is 15 (and rugby is quite a complex game) but the norm is less than that. The reason is simple: you cannot form deep relationships when you have a large number of people.

The number of links in a group of n people, as any mathematician will tell you, is a function of n^2 not of n itself. That means, in plain speech, that as a group gets bigger the number of links between pairs of people increases much faster than the number of people does. A group of 3 people has 3 pairs of links. A group of 15 has 105. A group of 30 has 435.

That explains why many church business groups do not work well: they are simply too big (even if that is not the only fault). It is hard to enable a group of 20 to play as a team. They need to do all they can within denominational rules to get numbers down.

6: Teams spend time together

A team depends on each other and so members seek to get to know each other well. Most teams will meet weekly or even daily and, in a work setting, are likely to bump into each other on a regular basis. The point is that relationships take time to build, and that means time in a variety of settings, not just when there is a business agenda.

It also means people take an interest in other team members' lives, outside the business environment. There will be an understanding of family pressures, of good times and tough times, of health or lack of it, and of feelings.

Most church committees will meet relatively infrequently but members will see each other at services and church events. If the group is seeking to play as a team, these regular occasions will be seen as opportunities to develop relationships. Again, a meeting agenda approach has little time for such thinking, even though in churches all should be members of the same family who care deeply for each other.

7: Teams rely on each other

Effective teams work as one, with each member contributing to the whole. This means that each person has to rely on everyone else for their contribution. No one can afford to be the star solo player. It's a matter of creating a symphony not a concerto. In some teams your very life depends on the other members (rock climbers, for example).

So it is sad to experience church business groups where members are seeking to get their own way with little thought for the others, where people say much but listen little, where arguments are to be won at all costs, or where some members never speak. Teams need to be committed to their task (point 2 above) but it depends on everyone seeking to achieve that task and realising that no member can do that on their own.

8: Teams train and challenge their members

Teams are never easy to be part of. The benefits of a well-run team are great, but the pain can be considerable. Good teams see training in becoming and being a team as vital. In all this members learn deep truths about themselves and should be growing into maturity.

Groups that focus on business meetings have little concept of developing each of their members in levels of honesty and vulnerability. People exist to get the business done, not to see the membership develop. If they saw the group as an opportunity for growing into both human and spiritual maturity, this could create a very different atmosphere.

9: Teams need a leader

Any team needs a leader. Being a team means that the style of leadership has to be appropriate for people who rely on each other and work as one. The leader is responsible for ensuring that the team works effectively and so is concerned with purpose and achievements but also with relationships and team members' own lives and challenges.

So any church business group, seeking to play as a team, needs a leader. But, and this is the crucial point, leading a team and chairing a meeting are two different tasks. Team leaders do not need to chair meetings to fulfil all that is expected of them. I argue that they can be better leaders of the team when not restrained in their views by being in the chair at meetings. Any business group needs two types of leader: one to lead the team in its 24/7 life, and another to skilfully pilot it through its key gatherings.

Beware a danger

It is of course possible for a team to veer off all these points, and in particular to become so focused on its members that it never gets any business done: in other words to go to the opposite extreme of the business group that focuses entirely on the task! But what this seeks to do is to correct an imbalance the other way on the basis that better business will be done when you pay proper attention to the people whose task it is to undertake that business.

A final point

When you read the New Testament epistles, written to small and often struggling communities of followers of Jesus Christ, it is interesting to see how much team language is used. We are to love one another, serve one another, encourage one another, even reprimand one another. This is team talk. So church committees should be in their element when they think in team-mode because this is how the New Testament sees church.

Team language not only makes sense at a human level, it is tightly tied up with Christian character and practical discipleship. Which makes it very sad when church committees come at their meetings with such a different attitude.

That has now covered a total of six advanced points about church meetings: three on planning and another three on people. Try one or two of them and see what difference they make to your church business gatherings.

You can access the first three points in Article A40 [here](#).

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A42. See also Articles A5, *How to chair meetings*, A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, and A45, *How to lead a team at church*, plus Training Notes TN41, *What makes a group a team*, TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, TN79, *'One another' teams*, and several other related items on this website.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training on better use of meetings in churches.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A41 under Structures with a link to Management.

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