Ultimate Marks Research Series – Paper 04

Responsibility Readiness in Young Leaders

Leadership Load, Emotional Pressure, and Responsibility Development in Schools and Youth Environments

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Framework: Load-Bearing Leadership™

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Author Note

Ric Marks is the founder of Ultimate Marks and creator of the Load-Bearing Leadership™ framework. His work focuses on structural leadership pressure, responsibility systems, emotional load, and sustainable leadership development across organisational, educational and community environments.

This paper extends the Load-Bearing Leadership™ framework into youth leadership and responsibility development.

Abstract

Leadership development in young people is commonly framed around confidence, communication, motivation, and achievement. While these elements remain valuable, they do not fully prepare young leaders for the emotional, relational, and structural pressures associated with responsibility.

This paper introduces the concept of **Responsibility Readiness**: the capacity for young people to carry responsibility with clarity, support, emotional steadiness, and shared leadership awareness before leadership pressure becomes isolating or unsustainable.

Drawing from the Load-Bearing Leadership™ framework, the paper examines how responsibility pressure develops within schools, sporting environments, youth organisations, and community leadership settings. It argues that many young leaders experience increasing levels of identity pressure, social visibility, emotional load, and decision strain without corresponding language, support structures, or developmental preparation.

The paper proposes that responsibility without adequate support, communication pathways, authority clarity, and emotional regulation produces early forms of leadership load concentration similar to patterns later observed in organisational and executive environments.

Through a structural and developmental lens, the paper reframes youth leadership as more than performance or recognition. Instead, it positions leadership development as the early formation of a young person's relationship with responsibility, pressure, communication, support-seeking, and shared leadership.

The paper further introduces a practical Responsibility Readiness model designed to support schools, youth leaders, parents, sporting organisations, and community groups in developing healthier, more sustainable leadership foundations for the next generation.

Keywords

Responsibility Readiness; Youth Leadership; Student Leadership; Leadership Development; Leadership Load; Load-Bearing Leadership; Emotional Regulation; Shared Leadership; Decision Confidence; Identity Pressure; Responsibility Capacity; Student Wellbeing; Leadership Sustainability; Schools; Youth Development; Leadership Under Pressure; Emerging Leaders; Community Leadership; Support Structures; Pressure Capacity

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1. Introduction

Modern young leaders are growing up within environments of increasing social visibility, emotional complexity, and performance pressure.

Schools, sporting organisations, youth groups, and community environments are encouraging leadership earlier than ever before. Young people are being asked to contribute, represent, mentor, influence, communicate, and lead within increasingly visible and emotionally demanding environments.

This represents a positive shift toward participation and leadership development. However, it also introduces new forms of responsibility pressure that many young people are insufficiently prepared to carry.

Youth leadership development commonly focuses on confidence, communication, teamwork, motivation, and achievement recognition. While these remain important, they do not fully address the structural and emotional realities associated with leadership responsibility.

Leadership eventually becomes more than performance.
It becomes:

- responsibility under visibility
- communication under pressure
- decision-making under uncertainty
- emotional regulation under scrutiny
- conflict navigation
- support-seeking
- relational accountability

Modern leadership pressure is intensified by conditions of persistent social exposure, comparison dynamics, identity sensitivity, and reduced tolerance for public mistakes.

As a result, many young leaders experience increasing levels of emotional strain, over-responsibility, hesitation, perfectionism, and hidden pressure without possessing the language or support structures required to process those experiences effectively.

This paper proposes that many youth leadership challenges are not primarily motivational or behavioural, but structural and developmental.

Drawing from the Load-Bearing Leadership™ framework, the paper introduces the concept of Responsibility Readiness: the capacity for young people to carry responsibility with clarity, support, emotional steadiness, and shared leadership awareness before leadership pressure becomes isolating or unsustainable.

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2. Leadership Development and Responsibility

Leadership development is often framed as the recognition of capability.

Students who demonstrate confidence, reliability, academic performance, communication ability, or maturity are commonly selected for leadership opportunities within schools and youth environments.

These opportunities may include:

- school captaincy
- student representative councils
- peer mentoring
- sporting leadership
- youth advocacy
- community representation

While these roles can significantly contribute to maturity and development, recognition alone does not prepare young people for the realities of leadership responsibility.

When a young person enters a leadership role, the nature of their participation changes.

They are no longer only participating within the environment.

They are increasingly expected to:

- represent others
- influence culture
- communicate clearly
- make decisions
- navigate conflict
- manage expectations

- model behaviour
- carry relational responsibility

This transition introduces forms of pressure that many young people have not yet learned to process.

Leadership therefore becomes emotionally real before many young leaders possess the developmental language or support structures necessary to carry responsibility sustainably.

As a result, leadership can unintentionally become associated with:

- silent pressure carrying
- emotional over-functioning
- fear of mistakes
- people-pleasing
- identity pressure
- isolation
- avoidance of difficult conversations
- dependence on adult reassurance

This creates a developmental gap between leadership recognition and leadership readiness.

The issue is not that young people are incapable of leadership.

The issue is that responsibility often arrives before young leaders are taught how to carry it well.

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3. Responsibility Pressure in Young People

Responsibility pressure in young people is often misunderstood because it does not always present as visible distress or behavioural disruption.

In many cases, pressure emerges quietly through emotional and relational patterns that remain largely hidden from adults, peers, and organisational structures.

Young leaders experiencing increasing responsibility pressure may demonstrate:

- perfectionism
- overthinking
- hesitation in decision-making
- excessive self-monitoring
- fear of criticism
- avoidance of conflict
- emotional withdrawal

- frustration becoming reactivity
- people-pleasing behaviours
- difficulty delegating responsibility
- dependence on external reassurance

These patterns are frequently interpreted as personality traits or maturity issues rather than indicators of accumulating leadership load.

Importantly, the most capable young people are often the most likely to absorb disproportionate emotional responsibility.

Students perceived as reliable, emotionally aware, or mature frequently become informal stabilisers within peer groups, classrooms, sporting environments, and leadership teams.

This creates conditions in which leadership load begins concentrating within specific individuals.

As responsibility accumulates, many young leaders begin attempting to internally compensate for unresolved pressure through increased effort, emotional suppression, social performance, or over-responsibility.

Over time, this can produce:

- emotional fatigue
- anxiety around leadership visibility
- reduced confidence after mistakes
- fear of disappointing others
- reluctance to lead again
- withdrawal from responsibility
- unhealthy identity attachment to performance

Responsibility pressure therefore should not be understood solely as an emotional wellbeing issue.

It is also a structural leadership issue.

Without appropriate support, communication pathways, and shared leadership structures, leadership responsibility can become psychologically and relationally unsustainable for young people.

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4. Leadership Load in Youth Environments

The Load-Bearing Leadership™ framework defines leadership stability as a function of structural alignment.

Within youth leadership environments, four structural forces significantly influence whether leadership pressure develops sustainably or becomes concentrated.

Responsibility

Responsibility refers to the expectations, obligations, and relational demands a young person is expected to carry.

This may include:

- representing peers
- supporting group cohesion
- managing behaviour expectations
- communicating on behalf of others
- resolving conflict
- maintaining standards
- responding to adult expectations

As leadership visibility increases, responsibility expands.

Authority

Authority refers to the level of decision-making power, autonomy, and role clarity provided to the young leader.

Many youth leadership environments increase responsibility without proportionately increasing:

- decision clarity
- authority boundaries
- permission to act
- escalation pathways
- role definition

This creates uncertainty regarding what the young person is genuinely empowered to carry.

Identity Pressure

Identity pressure refers to the emotional and social pressure associated with maintaining legitimacy, belonging, approval, and reputation.

For young leaders, identity pressure may include:

- fear of embarrassment
- peer judgement
- fear of exclusion
- fear of public mistakes
- pressure to appear confident
- social performance expectations

Modern digital and social environments intensify identity pressure significantly.

Structural Support

Structural support refers to the systems that allow leadership pressure to be carried sustainably.

This includes:

- adult mentorship
- emotional support
- communication pathways
- reflection opportunities
- shared leadership structures
- role clarity
- healthy feedback environments

When responsibility, authority, identity pressure, and structural support remain aligned, leadership load distributes more sustainably.

When misalignment emerges, leadership load begins to concentrate within specific individuals or roles.

This concentration produces increasing emotional and relational strain within young leaders.

4.1 Load Concentration in Young Leaders

Leadership systems rarely fail at the point of visible breakdown.

Pressure develops progressively through accumulation.

In youth leadership environments, load concentration occurs when emotional, relational, and organisational responsibility becomes disproportionately absorbed by specific young people without sufficient support or redistribution mechanisms.

Figure 2

Youth Leadership Load Concentration Progression

How leadership pressure develops when responsibility outpaces support

This often occurs gradually.

Initially, young leaders may compensate effectively through increased effort, maturity, compliance, or emotional suppression.

Over time, however, unresolved strain begins accumulating.

This may result in:

- emotional exhaustion
- increased sensitivity to criticism
- conflict avoidance
- reduced decision confidence
- withdrawal from leadership participation
- over-dependence on adults
- emotional shutdown
- reactive communication patterns

Load concentration may also create hidden dependency patterns within peer groups and youth environments.

Specific students become relied upon to:

- maintain group cohesion
- mediate conflict
- emotionally regulate peers
- carry organisational responsibility
- stabilise communication dynamics

As this concentration increases, leadership shifts from a developmental opportunity into an emotionally unsustainable burden.

Importantly, failure rarely appears suddenly.

It emerges progressively through unresolved structural imbalance between responsibility, support, authority, and emotional pressure.

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5. Identity Pressure and Social Visibility

Modern youth leadership environments operate within conditions of persistent social visibility.

Unlike previous generations, many young people now experience leadership within environments shaped by:

- continuous peer observation
- digital communication
- online identity construction
- public feedback loops
- social comparison
- heightened fear of embarrassment

This significantly alters how leadership pressure is experienced.

Mistakes are no longer perceived solely as private learning experiences.

They may become socially visible events capable of affecting belonging, reputation, confidence, and identity.

As a result, leadership increasingly becomes intertwined with self-perception and social legitimacy.

Young leaders may begin feeling pressure to:

- appear constantly confident
- avoid visible mistakes
- maintain social approval

- suppress uncertainty
- perform maturity
- protect reputation

This creates a condition where identity pressure intensifies leadership load.

Communication may become filtered through fear of judgement.

Decision-making may slow due to fear of criticism.

Support-seeking may reduce because vulnerability is perceived as reputational weakness.

These conditions increase the likelihood of:

- perfectionism
- emotional suppression
- avoidance behaviours
- social withdrawal
- reactive communication
- identity instability after failure

Identity pressure therefore does not merely accompany youth leadership strain.

It actively contributes to it.

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6. Responsibility Without Support

Leadership pressure becomes structurally unsustainable when responsibility expands without corresponding support.

This pattern is commonly observed within organisational leadership environments, where responsibility accumulates faster than authority, communication capacity, or structural backing.

The same pattern increasingly appears within youth leadership systems.

Young leaders are often expected to:

- maintain standards
- support peers
- represent groups
- communicate effectively
- model maturity
- manage conflict

- remain emotionally composed

Yet many receive limited preparation for the emotional and relational consequences associated with those expectations.

As a result, leadership responsibility can begin operating as hidden emotional load.

This load is frequently carried silently.

Many young leaders become highly functional externally while internally experiencing increasing:

- anxiety
- self-pressure
- emotional fatigue
- fear of failure
- fear of disappointing others
- reluctance to appear vulnerable

In some cases, students perceived as mature or dependable gradually become informal emotional stabilisers within their environments.

Peers rely on them.
Teachers trust them.
Groups depend on them.

Over time, this creates conditions in which responsibility becomes concentrated within a small number of individuals.

This concentration is often reinforced unintentionally through praise associated with:

- reliability
- emotional maturity
- compliance
- self-sacrifice
- over-contribution

However, responsibility carried without adequate support eventually produces strain.

Young leaders may begin:

- suppressing stress
- avoiding difficult conversations
- internalising mistakes excessively
- over-functioning socially
- feeling responsible for group outcomes beyond their control
- withdrawing emotionally after setbacks

This creates a condition where leadership appears stable externally while pressure accumulates internally.

Responsibility without support therefore becomes a structural load-bearing problem rather than merely an individual emotional challenge.

Importantly, the objective is not to remove responsibility from young people.

Responsibility remains essential for growth, maturity, contribution, and leadership development.

The issue is whether responsibility is being carried within environments capable of supporting it sustainably.

Healthy leadership development requires:

- emotional support
- communication pathways
- shared leadership structures
- permission to seek help
- reflection processes
- healthy boundaries
- realistic expectations

Without these, leadership may unintentionally teach young people that leadership means silently carrying pressure alone.

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7. The Responsibility Readiness Model

Responsibility Readiness refers to the ability to carry responsibility with clarity, support, emotional steadiness, and shared leadership awareness.

The model proposed within this paper identifies eight structural and developmental elements required for sustainable youth leadership development.

Figure I. Responsibility Readiness Model for Sustainable Youth Leadership Development.

7.1 Responsibility

Young leaders require clear understanding of what they are genuinely responsible for carrying.

Without clear boundaries, young people may begin internalising responsibility for:

- peer emotions
- group outcomes
- social harmony
- adult expectations
- issues beyond their influence or authority

Responsibility readiness requires distinguishing between:

- contribution
- influence
- accountability
- control

This prevents unnecessary over-responsibility and emotional overload.

7.2 Authority

Responsibility without authority creates hesitation, confusion, and dependency.

Young leaders need clarity regarding:

- what decisions they can make
- when to escalate concerns
- what authority they possess
- where boundaries exist

Authority clarity reduces fear-based decision paralysis and improves leadership confidence.

7.3 Support

Leadership should not be carried in isolation.

Young leaders require visible and accessible support systems, including:

- adult mentors
- communication pathways
- emotional support
- leadership debriefing
- shared responsibility structures

Support-seeking must be normalised as part of healthy leadership rather than interpreted as weakness.

7.4 Communication

Many leadership problems intensify because concerns remain unspoken until pressure becomes significant.

Young leaders benefit from learning:

- early communication
- conflict navigation
- emotional honesty
- respectful escalation
- expectation clarification

Communication reduces hidden load accumulation.

7.5 Shared Leadership

Leadership should not teach young people to become the sole stabilising force within a group.

Responsibility readiness includes understanding:

- teamwork
- delegation
- mutual support
- collaborative problem-solving
- distributed responsibility

Shared leadership reduces unhealthy dependency patterns and prevents load concentration.

7.6 Emotional Regulation

Leadership pressure activates emotional responses including:

- frustration
- embarrassment
- fear
- disappointment
- uncertainty
- self-doubt

Young leaders require language and strategies for recognising and managing these responses constructively.

Emotional regulation supports steadier communication, healthier recovery after mistakes, and improved resilience under pressure.

7.7 Decision Confidence

Leadership frequently requires action before certainty is available.

Many young leaders hesitate because they associate mistakes with personal failure or social rejection.

Responsibility readiness includes developing the ability to:

- make reasonable decisions
- tolerate uncertainty
- adjust after mistakes
- remain functional under pressure

Decision confidence reduces excessive dependence on external reassurance.

7.8 Reflection and Repair

Mistakes form part of leadership development.

Young leaders require environments that support:

- reflection
- accountability
- learning
- repair conversations
- emotional recovery

Without opportunities for repair, leadership mistakes may become internalised as identity failure rather than developmental experience.

The Responsibility Readiness model therefore positions leadership development not as performance training, but as the development of healthier relationships with responsibility itself.

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8. Practical Implications for Schools and Communities

The findings within this paper suggest that youth leadership development requires broader structural support than is commonly provided within many educational and community environments.

Leadership opportunities remain highly valuable for developing maturity, contribution, communication, and initiative.

However, sustainable leadership development requires more than assigning responsibility or recognising achievement.

Schools, sporting organisations, youth groups, and community programs can strengthen leadership development by intentionally supporting responsibility readiness.

This may include:

- structured mentoring for student leaders
- regular leadership reflection sessions
- communication and conflict-navigation training
- clearer authority boundaries
- shared leadership models
- emotional regulation education
- leadership debriefing after challenging situations
- support pathways for overwhelmed students
- healthy expectation-setting around responsibility

Importantly, leadership development should avoid unintentionally rewarding unhealthy over-functioning behaviours such as:

- carrying excessive emotional load

- constant self-sacrifice
- avoidance of vulnerability
- inability to seek support
- perfectionistic performance pressure

Schools and communities also benefit from recognising that leadership pressure increasingly exists within digitally connected and socially visible environments.

As a result, leadership support systems must account for:

- social visibility pressure
- online identity dynamics
- peer judgement
- public performance anxiety
- emotional fatigue associated with constant social exposure

Community partnerships may also strengthen responsibility readiness development.

Mentors, sporting organisations, sponsors, youth organisations, and community leaders can contribute to healthier leadership formation by reinforcing:

- shared responsibility
- communication
- service
- resilience
- reflection
- emotional honesty
- support-seeking

Leadership development should therefore be understood as a long-term developmental process rather than a short-term performance activity.

The objective is not merely to produce confident young leaders.

It is to develop young people capable of carrying responsibility sustainably within increasingly complex social environments.

8.1 Practical Reflection Questions

- Where are young leaders carrying responsibility without enough support?
- Which students are becoming informal emotional stabilisers?
- Where are leadership expectations unclear?
- Are students rewarded for over-functioning?
- Where is fear of mistakes reducing participation?
- Where are communication pathways weak?
- Are young leaders allowed to struggle honestly?

8.2 Implications for Schools, Sporting Organisations, and Community Groups

The findings within this paper suggest that responsibility readiness should be viewed as a shared developmental priority across educational, sporting, and community environments.

Young people increasingly carry leadership expectations within socially visible, emotionally demanding, and highly connected environments. As a result, leadership development requires more than confidence-building or performance recognition alone.

Schools, sporting organisations, and community groups occupy a significant position in shaping how young people understand:

- responsibility
- communication
- authority
- teamwork
- emotional regulation
- support-seeking
- leadership identity

This creates both opportunity and responsibility.

Schools

Schools are often the first structured environments in which young people experience formal leadership responsibility.

Student leadership systems therefore influence not only school culture, but also how young people develop long-term relationships with:

- responsibility
- confidence
- communication
- decision-making
- emotional pressure
- contribution

Educational environments may strengthen leadership sustainability by:

- incorporating leadership reflection practices
- providing structured mentoring
- clarifying leadership expectations
- teaching communication under pressure
- normalising support-seeking
- reducing unhealthy perfectionism

- encouraging shared leadership models
- recognising emotional load alongside performance

Importantly, leadership programs should not unintentionally reward unhealthy over-functioning behaviours such as emotional suppression, constant self-sacrifice, or excessive responsibility carrying.

Leadership development should prepare students for sustainable contribution rather than continuous performance pressure.

Sporting Organisations

Sporting environments often expose young people to leadership pressure earlier and more intensely than many educational settings.

Team captains, emerging leaders, and influential players frequently navigate:

- performance expectations
- peer dynamics
- public visibility
- emotional pressure
- competition stress
- conflict resolution
- group morale responsibilities

Without appropriate support, young athletes may begin associating leadership with:

- emotional suppression
- fear of mistakes
- perfectionism
- over-responsibility
- identity attachment to performance

Sporting organisations may strengthen responsibility readiness by:

- teaching emotional regulation alongside performance
- supporting healthy communication practices
- encouraging shared leadership structures
- reducing unhealthy performance identity pressure
- developing mentor-supported leadership pathways
- creating psychologically safe feedback environments

These approaches support both leadership sustainability and athlete wellbeing.

Community and Youth Organisations

Community organisations, youth groups, and mentoring programs play a critical role in leadership identity formation.

These environments often provide young people with:

- belonging
- contribution opportunities
- mentorship
- social connection
- responsibility experiences
- service-oriented leadership opportunities

As a result, community environments may significantly influence whether young people experience leadership as:

- collaborative or isolating
- developmental or performative
- supported or emotionally unsafe

Leadership environments that encourage reflection, communication, shared responsibility, and emotional honesty may contribute to healthier long-term leadership development outcomes.

Sponsorship and Community Investment

The Responsibility Readiness model also creates opportunities for broader community investment into youth leadership development.

Businesses, sponsors, foundations, and local organisations increasingly seek meaningful ways to contribute to community resilience and future leadership capacity.

Responsibility readiness initiatives may provide opportunities for:

- sponsored school leadership programs
- community mentoring partnerships
- youth leadership workshops
- sporting leadership initiatives
- grant-funded pilot programs
- leadership wellbeing initiatives
- regional youth development partnerships

This positions youth leadership development not only as an educational concern, but as a long-term community capability investment.

Structural Implication

The broader implication is that leadership sustainability begins forming well before adulthood.

The environments young people experience during early leadership formation significantly influence how they later approach:

- responsibility
- pressure
- authority
- communication
- collaboration
- emotional regulation
- leadership identity

Schools, sporting organisations, and communities therefore play an important role in determining whether leadership becomes associated with:

- sustainable contribution
  or
- silent pressure carrying.

Responsibility readiness is not solely about preparing future leaders.

It is about helping young people develop healthier relationships with responsibility before unhealthy leadership patterns become structurally embedded.

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9. Conclusion

Leadership development in young people is commonly associated with confidence, visibility, communication, and achievement.

While these remain important, they are insufficient on their own to prepare young leaders for the emotional and structural realities of responsibility.

Modern leadership environments expose young people to increasing levels of:

- social visibility
- identity pressure
- emotional complexity
- performance expectation
- relational strain
- decision uncertainty

Without adequate support, communication structures, and developmental preparation, leadership pressure may become isolating, overwhelming, or unsustainable.

This paper has proposed that many youth leadership challenges are not primarily behavioural or motivational.

They are structural and developmental.

Drawing from the Load-Bearing Leadership™ framework, the paper introduced Responsibility Readiness as a model for helping young people develop healthier relationships with responsibility before leadership load becomes concentrated.

The findings suggest that sustainable leadership development requires:

- alignment between responsibility and support
- clearer authority structures
- communication pathways
- emotional regulation capacity
- reflection and repair processes
- shared leadership cultures

Importantly, the goal is not to reduce expectations of young people.

The goal is to ensure that responsibility is carried within environments capable of supporting healthy development.

The future stability of leadership may depend less on producing more confident young people and more on developing healthier relationships with responsibility before leadership load becomes isolating, performative, or structurally unsustainable.

Leadership sustainability does not begin in executive roles or organisational systems.

It begins much earlier.

It begins in the first environments where young people are trusted to carry responsibility for others.

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10. Future Research

The Responsibility Readiness framework introduced within this paper represents an initial structural model for understanding how young people experience leadership pressure, responsibility, and support within modern educational and community environments.

Further research may strengthen understanding of how leadership load develops across adolescence and early adulthood, particularly within socially visible and emotionally complex environments.

Areas for future exploration may include:

- leadership pressure and adolescent emotional regulation
- responsibility readiness within sporting environments
- digital visibility and youth leadership pressure
- long-term leadership sustainability outcomes
- youth leadership and organisational readiness pathways
- responsibility load concentration within peer leadership systems

- support structures and leadership resilience in schools
- identity pressure and performance-based leadership cultures
- mentorship models for emerging young leaders
- leadership readiness and community wellbeing outcomes

Further longitudinal and cross-sector research may also assist in identifying how early leadership experiences influence later workplace leadership behaviours, decision confidence, communication patterns, and relationships with responsibility.

As leadership expectations continue evolving across educational, organisational, and social environments, understanding how responsibility pressure develops earlier in life may become increasingly important for leadership sustainability, workforce development, and community resilience.

The Responsibility Readiness model therefore represents not only a youth leadership framework, but a broader foundation for examining how sustainable leadership capacity is formed across the lifespan.

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