

# Analysis of the Role of the School Principal in Creating a Quality Culture in the Educational Environment

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## Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis secara mendalam peran ganda kepemimpinan transformasional-distributif Kepala Sekolah (KS) pada sekolah berprestasi tinggi dalam menginisiasi, mengimplementasikan, dan mempertahankan lima pilar utama Budaya Mutu di lingkungan pendidikan. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif melalui Studi Kasus Multipel, dengan pengumpulan data multilevel melalui triangulasi sumber (Kepala Sekolah, Guru Inti/Koordinator Mutu, Siswa, dan Orang Tua). Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan Budaya Mutu yang berkelanjutan dicapai melalui sinergi strategis antara Kepemimpinan Transformasional (sebagai penggagas komitmen moral dan visi etis) dan Kepemimpinan Distributif (sebagai mekanisme pelebagaan otonomi guru dan penerapan Siklus PDCA), di mana kepercayaan timbal balik menjadi variabel kunci yang mengubah kepatuhan menjadi komitmen. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada penyajian model peran kontekstual Kepala Sekolah sebagai arsitek budaya, penggabungan mekanisme spesifik implementasi mutu (mengisi “kotak hitam” penelitian sebelumnya), serta penggabungan dua model kepemimpinan kontemporer. Implikasi praktis utama adalah tersedianya peta jalan (praktik terbaik) bagi Lembaga Pengembangan dan Pemberdayaan Kepala Sekolah (LP2KS) untuk merevisi kurikulum pelatihan, dengan penekanan pada pengembangan keterampilan Kepemimpinan Distributif. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam memperkaya khazanah keilmuan kepemimpinan pendidikan dalam konteks Asia Tenggara.

**Kata kunci:** Budaya Mutu, Kepala Sekolah, Kepemimpinan Distributif, Kepemimpinan Transformasional, Peningkatan Berkelanjutan.

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze in depth the dual role of transformational- distributive leadership of the School Principal (SP) in high- performing schools in initiating, implementing, and sustaining the five main pillars of Quality Culture within the educational environment The research method used is a qualitative approach through a Multiple Case Study, collecting multilevel data through source triangulation (School Principals, Core Teachers/Quality Coordinators, Students, and Parents). The main findings show that the success of sustainable Quality Culture is achieved through the strategic synergy between Transformational Leadership (as the initiator of moral commitment and ethical vision) and Distributed Leadership (as the mechanism for institutionalizing teacher autonomy and applying the PDCA Cycle), where mutual trust becomes the key variable that transforms compliance into commitment. The novelty of this research lies in presenting the contextualized role model of the School Principal as a culture architect, uncovering the specific mechanisms of quality implementation (filling the research black box from previous studies), and combining two contemporary leadership models. The main practical implication is the provision of a roadmap (best practices) for School Principal Development and Empowerment Institutions (LP2KS) to revise training curricula, with an emphasis on developing Distributed Leadership skills. This study contributes theoretically by enriching the body of knowledge on educational leadership in the Southeast Asian context..

**Keywords:** Quality Culture, School Principal, Distributed Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Continuous Improvement.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Education constitutes the fundamental cornerstone in the development of a nation's human capital. Enhancing educational quality has evolved into a global imperative, driven by the escalating demands of competitiveness in the era of industrial revolution and societal transformation. Scholarly consensus asserts that superior educational quality rests upon three principal pillars: teacher competence, adequate facilities and infrastructure, and effective school leadership (Avila, 2023; Shafiq, et al., 2023).

Within the framework of educational management, quality culture refers to a constellation of shared values, beliefs, and norms that emphasize continuous improvement, wherein every member of the school organization assumes collective responsibility for excellence (Nabella et al., 2022; Wulogening & Timan, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that a robust quality culture correlates positively with enhanced student academic achievement (Cheng, 2019), heightened stakeholder satisfaction including students, parents, and communities and improved institutional effectiveness.

The school principal's role as both institutional leader and manager has been widely acknowledged as pivotal in catalyzing and sustaining cultural transformation. Beyond administrative functions, the principal serves as an instructional and transformational leader who exemplifies quality-oriented values and fosters collaborative engagement. (Palah, et al., 2022; Lukita, et al., 2023). Transformational leadership theory, in particular, underscores intrinsic motivation and the cultivation of collective organizational capacity to pursue shared objectives that transcend individual interests (Northouse, 2020).

Despite extensive recognition of the importance of quality culture and principal leadership, numerous schools in Indonesia continue to encounter challenges in systematically implementing quality management practices. Institutional focus frequently remains confined to quantitative indicators, such as examination outcomes, rather than internalizing qualitative principles of continuous improvement. Consequently, principals often become preoccupied with administrative compliance instead of functioning as proactive agents of cultural change (Suryadi, 2021). This condition underscores the necessity for in-depth analysis of the specific mechanisms through which principals embed sustainable quality values within the school community.

Although scholarly consensus affirms the centrality of principal leadership in cultivating quality culture, significant research gaps persist, particularly within the Indonesian educational context over the past five years.

First, regarding internal transformational mechanisms, existing studies tend to be normative or correlational in nature. Limited research has undertaken comprehensive case analyses exploring the concrete strategies employed by principals such as value communication frameworks, institutional rituals, or non-monetary recognition systems to shift organizational paradigms from compliance-based behavior to authentic commitment to quality (Hafid & Rosyada, 2022). The process through which quality values accountability, innovation, and

continuous improvement transition from policy articulation to deeply internalized practice remains insufficiently examined.

Second, concerning contextual differentiation, the influence of principal leadership varies considerably across school environments, including rural versus urban settings, public versus private institutions, and resource-rich versus resource-constrained schools. Nevertheless, much of the literature generalizes findings without sufficiently addressing contextual adaptation. Empirical inquiry into leadership strategies within under-resourced schools such as resource optimization or the integration of local wisdom remains limited (Kholid, 2023).

Third, with respect to multilevel perceptions of quality, research predominantly privileges the perspectives of principals or teachers. Few contemporary studies adopt a triangulated lens incorporating principals, teachers, and students or parents simultaneously. Divergent interpretations of “quality” across these stakeholder groups for instance, quality as process for teachers, as conducive learning environment for students, and as measurable outcomes for principals require systematic examination to identify implementation gaps.

Recent scholarship has shifted from classical leadership paradigms toward more integrative models such as Shared Leadership and Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2020; Hameed & Amjad, 2023). These perspectives posit that effective leadership in contemporary schools entails the strategic delegation and empowerment of teachers and staff to assume leadership roles aligned with their professional expertise.

Empirical findings reinforce this evolution. A study by Susanto (2023) published in the *International Journal of Educational Management* demonstrates that the effectiveness of school quality culture is strongly associated with the principal’s capacity to distribute quality-related responsibilities across core teams. Similarly, Widyastuti (2024) emphasizes the critical role of emotional intelligence in cultivating trust and moral commitment to the institutional quality vision an aspect frequently underemphasized in traditional leadership analyses. Concurrently, the adaptation of Total Quality Management (TQM) frameworks to educational settings (TQM-E) has gained scholarly attention, particularly regarding continuous improvement through the PDCA cycle and stakeholder-oriented approaches (Afriadi, 2022; Tetteh, 2023). However, TQM-E research remains predominantly concentrated in higher education, leaving elementary and secondary contexts comparatively underexplored (Syarifah, 2020; Wulogening & Timan, 2020; Ouyang, et al., 2024).

This study advances a novel conceptual contribution by examining the dual integration of transformational and distributed leadership roles enacted by school principals in fostering a quality culture. Rather than merely identifying leadership actions, this research interrogates the processes through which principals operationalize distributed leadership strategies to systematically embed the five foundational pillars of quality culture customer focus, stakeholder engagement, continuous improvement, leadership commitment, and evidence-based decision-making within high-performing schools. The originality of this inquiry lies in conceptualizing the principal as a cultural architect rather than a purely administrative authority.

The implications of this research extend to policymakers, particularly educational authorities and principal development institutions (LP2KS). The proposed model may inform leadership training curricula oriented toward organizational culture development rather than exclusively managerial competencies. For practitioners, this study delineates empirically grounded best practices for cultivating a sustainable quality-oriented school climate.

This research offers three principal contributions (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024):

1. **Theoretical Contribution:** Expands educational leadership theory by integrating transformational and distributed leadership frameworks within the context of quality culture development in Southeast Asia (Indonesia).
2. **Methodological Contribution:** Provides a rigorous qualitative analysis characterized by thick description and comprehensive data triangulation, addressing the predominance of correlational approaches in existing literature (Saha, et al., 2023)
3. **Empirical Contribution:** Generates empirical evidence concerning key success indicators in principal leadership for constructing a learning ecosystem intrinsically motivated by collective commitment to quality (Obah, 2024).

Drawing upon the identified background, research gaps, and contemporary scholarly developments, the central research question guiding this study is:

How does the transformational-distributed leadership role of the school principal in high-performing schools initiate, implement, and sustain the five principal pillars of quality culture within the educational environment?

## **2. METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing a **Multiple Case Study** approach to conduct an in-depth and holistic examination of the principal's transformational–distributed leadership role in cultivating a sustainable quality culture. The research sites were purposively selected, comprising two to three schools that have consistently implemented structured quality improvement programs for a minimum duration of three years (Oe, et al., 2022; Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2021; Keeley, et al., 2019).

Research participants were determined through purposive sampling to ensure a multilevel, triangulated perspective. The selected informants included the School Principal, core teachers or quality coordinators, students, and representatives of parents or school committees. This configuration enabled the exploration of leadership practices and quality culture from diverse organizational vantage points.

Primary data were gathered through methodological triangulation. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to uncover transformational leadership strategies and the specific mechanisms utilized to institutionalize quality values. Second, participatory observations were undertaken to directly examine the enactment of quality culture within daily school practices and interactions. Third, open-ended questionnaires were administered to complement qualitative findings and to map broader stakeholder perceptions. In addition, secondary data sources such as institutional quality assurance documents, policy guidelines, and performance reports were systematically reviewed to contextualize and corroborate primary findings.

Data analysis adhered to the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, encompassing three concurrent stages: (1) data reduction, which involved coding and categorizing data with particular emphasis on dual leadership roles and identified transformational mechanisms; (2) data display, through the development of analytical matrices and narrative syntheses to facilitate pattern recognition; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, including cross-case analysis to identify similarities, contrasts, and emergent themes across research sites (Khasinah, et al., 2024; Revniuk & Bátyi, 2023).

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the study employed both source triangulation comparing information obtained from different categories of informants and methodological triangulation, by cross-validating evidence derived from interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documentary analysis. These procedures strengthened the rigor and confirmability of the research conclusions.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### ***Result***

Cross-case analysis unequivocally indicates that the sustained success of high-performing schools in cultivating a resilient Quality Culture is rooted in the strategic integration of Transformational Leadership and Distributed (Shared) Leadership enacted by the School Principal (SP). Within this dual-leadership configuration, Transformational Leadership operates as the Culture Initiator formulating vision, embedding moral commitment, and institutionalizing ethical values whereas Distributed Leadership serves as the Institutionalization Mechanism, converting that aspirational vision into structured responsibilities and fostering autonomy within teacher-based teams. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes the SP as the Architect of Quality Culture, deliberately navigating two complementary leadership modes to secure collective commitment to excellence (Nieto, 2019; Nabella et al., 2022; Nurmiyanti & Candra, 2019).

#### ***1) Transformational Mode (Vision and Commitment)***

The Transformational Mode constitutes the foundational impulse required to disrupt organizational inertia and stimulate cultural change. It generates emotional resonance and intrinsic motivation, enabling staff members to transcend individual interests and align themselves with collective quality-oriented objectives. In this mode, the SP exemplifies ethical leadership through consistent modeling of integrity, accountability, discipline, and professional responsibility, while articulating a compelling and future-oriented institutional vision. Absent a clearly communicated ethical direction and moral commitment from the apex of leadership, quality initiatives risk being perceived as peripheral administrative demands rather than as transformative organizational priorities (Vargas et al., 2020)(Miller, et al., 2021).

#### ***2) Distributed Mode (Action and Empowerment)***

Once the strategic vision has been firmly established, Distributed Leadership ensures continuity and sustainability. This mode operationalizes vision by systematically allocating meaningful authority, decision-making power, and professional autonomy to core teacher

teams, Quality Coordinators, and support staff. The effectiveness of quality institutionalization is contingent not merely upon task delegation, but upon the SP’s authentic willingness to decentralize strategic authority within a structured teacher leadership network. Genuine empowerment cultivates ownership, collaborative accountability, and professional agency thereby embedding quality practices into the organizational fabric (Tanduklangi, et al., 2019; Linder & Falk-Ross, 2024).

**3) Trust as a Mediating Variable**

In-depth analysis reveals that the efficacy of Distributed Leadership is significantly mediated by the degree of trust and mutual respect between the SP and the professional staff. Trust functions as a catalytic mechanism within the transformational process. Delegation devoid of relational trust yields compliance that is essentially transactional in nature. Conversely, when authority distribution is grounded in high levels of trust, it nurtures psychological safety, belongingness, and shared identity among teachers. Under such conditions, compliance evolves into authentic moral commitment, thereby strengthening the internalization of quality values across the institution.

**4) Cross-Case Synthesis: Institutionalization of the Five Pillars of Quality (KPIs)**

The comparative findings further demonstrate that the five foundational pillars of Quality Culture are institutionalized through the deliberate synergy of the SP’s dual leadership roles. Each pillar is translated into measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and enacted collectively within the school ecosystem. The interplay between transformational vision-setting and distributed implementation ensures that quality principles are not episodic initiatives, but rather systematically embedded and sustainably practiced organizational norms.

**Table 1.** *Synergy Matrix of the School Principal's Dual Roles in Implementing the Five Pillars of Quality Culture*

<b>Pillars of Quality Culture (TQM-E)</b>	<b>KPI Key Success Factors Identified</b>	<b>Dominant Dual Role of the School Principal (SP)</b>
<b>Customer Focus</b>	Existence of a tri-level feedback system (students, parents, industry/community) that is institutionalized.	Distributed (Data Collection and Analysis)
<b>Stakeholder Engagement</b>	High level of teacher autonomy in instructional design and decision-making processes related to quality.	Distributed (Granting Freedom and Respect)

<b>Continuous Improvement</b>	Routine and consistent use of the PDCA Cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act) as a diagnostic and improvement tool, not just administrative reporting.	Distributed & Transformational (Institutionalizing Systems and Motivating Innovation)
<b>Leadership</b>	The School Principal as a Role Model for Ethics [2] and the development of Collective Leadership Capacity at various levels.	Transformational (Modeling) & Distributed (Capacity Building)
<b>Fact-Based Approach</b>	Strategic decision-making based on performance data (student data and self-evaluation by teachers/schools), not intuition or bureaucratic pressure.	Transformational & Distributed (Accountability and Data Transparency)

### **5) Strategic Communication of the Quality Vision and the Construction of Moral Commitment**

Effective school principals frame quality not merely as compliance with externally imposed, legalistic standards, but as an intrinsic moral obligation embedded within the professional identity of educators. Through structured organizational rituals such as routine briefings, reflective forums, and performance dialogues they continuously reaffirm and institutionalize a shared narrative surrounding the school's quality vision. Empirical evidence suggests that a clearly articulated vision, coupled with inspirational leadership, significantly enhances teacher motivation and performance outcomes.

In one case, the principal deliberately invoked narratives of "historical responsibility" and "ethical excellence" as foundational references for defining quality benchmarks. Such discourse transcends instrumental motivation, appealing instead to teachers' professional conscience and collective ethical identity. Consequently, quality becomes internalized as a moral calling rather than an externally enforced obligation.

### **6) The Principal as Ethical Exemplar: Modeling the Way**

The effectiveness of the transformational role is contingent upon credibility derived from consistent exemplary conduct. In high-performing schools, principals demonstrate discipline, transparency, integrity, and accountability in daily practice. Ethical leadership manifested through principled decision-making, fairness, and moral consistency establishes the legitimacy necessary for teachers to embrace the communicated vision of quality.

Contrary to narratives suggesting that many principals are confined to administrative routines (Suryadi, 2021), findings from this study indicate that successful principals are visibly engaged in operational realities and consistently embody the ethical standards they advocate. This behavioral congruence forms the foundation of trust required for the subsequent distribution of authority within the institutionalization phase.

### **7) Quality Implementation through Distributed Leadership: Empowerment and Execution**

Sustainable quality implementation cannot remain centralized. It necessitates the systematic delegation of authority to teacher leadership networks, ensuring that quality practices become embedded, autonomous, and collectively sustained.

#### *Customer Focus – Distributed Needs Analysis*

The Customer Focus pillar centered on students and parents is institutionalized through a designated quality team responsible for gathering, analyzing, and responding to stakeholder feedback. In alignment with Total Quality Management in Education (TQM-E), customer orientation is operationalized through structured feedback systems and responsive curriculum adaptation. In the case schools, principals empowered quality teams to adapt the concept of Quality Function Deployment (QFD), translating student and parent needs into concrete curricular and instructional requirements. This delegation exemplifies distributed leadership in action: enabling others to act with professional autonomy while maintaining strategic alignment.

#### *Stakeholder Engagement – Trust Networks and Professional Autonomy*

Distributed Leadership serves as the principal mechanism for strengthening stakeholder engagement. Cross-case evidence indicates that principals prioritize relational trust-building and grant substantive professional autonomy to teachers. Respectful treatment, confidence in professional judgment, and flexibility in pedagogical approaches cultivate psychological ownership and collective responsibility. Trust and autonomy generate a strong sense of belonging among educators, transforming passive compliance into proactive commitment. Such participatory structures stimulate contextual learning innovations and reinforce the embeddedness of quality culture within the institutional fabric.

### **8) Safeguarding quality through continuous improvement systems**

The sustainability of quality culture depends upon the presence of an internally corrective and self-regulating system. In the examined schools, this function is fulfilled through the institutionalization of the Total Quality Management in Education (TQM-E) framework.

#### *Continuous Improvement – Institutionalizing the PDCA Cycle*

Continuous improvement is operationalized through the systematic application of the PDCA (Plan–Do–Check–Act) Cycle. Rather than remaining rhetorical jargon, PDCA becomes a routinized operational protocol guiding planning, implementation, evaluation, and corrective action. Critically, the principal distributes PDCA responsibilities: the “Check” phase (data analysis and diagnostic evaluation) is delegated to Quality Coordinators, while the “Act” phase (formulation of corrective strategies) is entrusted to core teacher teams. This structured decentralization ensures that improvement processes are collectively owned and cyclically sustained.

#### *Fact-Based Decision-Making – Data as Collective Language*

A fact-based approach requires that strategic decisions be grounded in objective self-evaluation and performance metrics, consistent with TQM principles. The Transformational–

Distributed Principal cultivates collective data literacy, enabling educators to initiate and sustain instructional refinements informed by empirical evidence. Importantly, the data utilized extend beyond quantitative examination scores to include process-oriented indicators such as student engagement metrics and teacher self-assessments. By distributing data analysis across teams, quality becomes a transparent and shared organizational language rather than a top-down evaluative instrument.

## Discussion

This discussion advances a nuanced theoretical synthesis by integrating transformational and distributed leadership within the Total Quality Management in Education (TQM-E) framework. TQM-E emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder satisfaction, and collective commitment to quality (Afriadi, 2022; Tetteh, 2023). Within this framework, transformational leadership functions as the initial catalytic force that builds *emotional capital* in the form of shared vision, intrinsic motivation, and moral commitment to educational excellence. This perspective aligns with Hafid and Rosyada (2022), who argue that principals as change agents must embed innovation-oriented values through persuasive and inspirational strategies. Similarly, Harahap (2021) demonstrates that transformational leadership mediates school culture and teacher efficacy, while Hallinger and Heck (2010) confirm that leadership for learning significantly influences instructional improvement. Thus, transformational leadership establishes the normative and motivational foundation necessary for quality transformation.

However, vision alone is insufficient without structural mechanisms for implementation. Distributed leadership translates emotional capital into *social capital* through trust-based networks, collaborative professionalism, and shared accountability (Hameed & Amjad, 2023; Susanto, 2023). In the context of TQM-E, participatory structures enable systematic and sustainable quality cycles (Siregar, 2022; Wulogening & Timan, 2020). Mulyono (2021) further emphasizes that collaborative culture, facilitated by the principal, becomes the backbone of continuous improvement. This synergy explains how visionary commitments become institutionalized through empowered team-based systems, extending beyond prior research that predominantly examined correlational relationships between leadership style and school outcomes.

Nevertheless, this integrated model encounters structural and systemic constraints. Bureaucratic educational environments often prioritize procedural compliance and regulatory conformity over professional autonomy and innovation (Suryadi, 2021; Palah et al., 2022). Under such conditions, distributed leadership may be reduced to administrative delegation rather than substantive empowerment. Kholid (2023) highlights the necessity of adaptive leadership in resource-constrained and policy-driven contexts, while Ginting (2023) stresses that translating quality policies into practice requires strategic buffering from rigid external controls. Consequently, the principal's role expands from internal architect to external mediator who safeguards professional autonomy from counterproductive bureaucratic pressures.

In addition to structural barriers, the effectiveness of distributed leadership presupposes adequate collective capacity among teachers. Without sufficient professional competence, ethical standards, and reflective practice, distributed autonomy may intensify performance disparities rather than enhance school quality (Shafiq et al., 2023). Afriadi (2022)

underscores that TQM-E success depends heavily on human capital strength and data-driven evaluation systems. In contemporary learning contexts particularly those involving digital innovation and multimodal pedagogy (Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2021; Linder & Falk-Ross, 2024) teachers require robust instructional competencies to ensure that autonomy leads to meaningful innovation rather than fragmented practices. Therefore, transformational leadership must be complemented by firm, equitable, and performance-oriented management structures to maintain accountability (Putri & Darmawan, 2024) and sustain a coherent quality culture (Syafei, 2024).

Overall, integrating transformational and distributed leadership within the TQM-E framework offers a comprehensive explanation of how school quality becomes institutionalized. Transformational leadership ignites moral direction and shared purpose, while distributed leadership operationalizes that vision through collaborative systems. Yet, the sustainability of this model ultimately depends on the principal's capacity to navigate bureaucratic constraints and systematically strengthen collective professional competence as the foundation of adaptive and learning-centered schools.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This multiple case study demonstrates that the transformational–distributed leadership role of the School Principal in high-performing schools across the phases of initiating, implementing, and sustaining a Quality Culture is realized through a strategic synergy between Transformational Leadership and Distributed Leadership frameworks. Within this integrative model, trust and mutual respect emerge as critical mediating variables that enable the effective translation of leadership vision into collective organizational practice.

The School Principal operates as an Architect of Quality Culture. Through a transformational orientation, the principal articulates and institutionalizes an ethical vision that cultivates intrinsic moral commitment among staff members. Subsequently, through a distributed leadership approach, the principal systematically delegates authority, strengthens the collective professional capacity of educators, and ensures the structured enactment of the five core pillars of quality culture including the operationalization of the PDCA Cycle as a shared organizational responsibility rather than an individual mandate.

The practical implications of these findings underscore the urgency of reformulating the School Principal training curriculum administered by LP2KS to prioritize the development of distributed leadership competencies, trust-building capabilities, and relational governance skills. Moreover, policy frameworks must be strengthened to position the principal as an external buffer capable of mitigating bureaucratic constraints while simultaneously enabling accountable and performance-based teacher management systems.

For future scholarly inquiry, it is recommended that quantitative research be conducted to empirically test the mediating role of trust in the relationship between distributed leadership practices and sustained continuous improvement. Additionally, comparative studies examining the principal's role in cultivating quality culture within resource-constrained schools are warranted to refine contextual leadership models and enhance the generalizability of findings across diverse educational settings.

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