

# Building Leadership Teams: A Comprehensive Study of America's College and University Presidents, 1988-2003

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**Abstract:** The study replicates a comprehensive study of college and university presidents conducted by the author 17 years ago and reported in *Leaders for a New Era* published by ACE/MacMillan in 1988. Changes in presidential leadership team processes and strategies are described. The research project investigated presidential leadership teams using an eight-item survey that was mailed to 100 college and university presidents at Research Universities and Liberal Arts Colleges as identified by the Carnegie taxonomy of institutional types. The survey was returned in the fall of 2003 by 62 of 100 presidents. Analysis resulted in findings that included: increased centrality of team building as a critical presidential ability; new insights regarding the implementation of team/builder/leader within institutions of higher education; and changing perceptions of the role of the president with regard to the institution's board of trustees and society's call for moral leadership.

This article reports on research that replicated a comprehensive study of college and university presidents conducted by the author 17 years ago and reported in Chapter 8 on "Building Leadership Teams" (1988, pp. 137-153) in *Leaders for a new era: Strategies for higher education* edited by Madeleine F. Green and published by the American Council on Education and Macmillan Publishing Company.

In 1988, leadership teams were considered "an agenda for the future" as leadership was then largely viewed as belonging to one strong man or woman of vision and charisma rather than to the many able people surrounding that individual. As Madeleine Green (1988, p.51) said at the conclusion of her essay in the book, "If teams and work groups are indeed the cornerstone of the effective institution in the information society, as Gardiner maintains in Chapter 8 of this volume, then the development of teams as functional units and of individuals as team members will have to be far more central to leadership development." Indeed, time has validated that premise and has pointed to the importance of the original research. For that reason, the author considered replicating the

study with a new group of college and university presidents to determine how that reality was perceived in the field and whether new ideas and/or insights were available from the current leaders on the subject of presidential teams. I added two questions to the original survey regarding the relationship of the president to another key leadership team in his/her life: the institution's board of trustees.

## Introduction

It was my good fortune in 1992 to receive a copy of a book to review for The Johns Hopkins University Press: *Redesigning collegiate leadership: Teams and teamwork in higher education* by Estela Mara Bensimon and Anna Neumann. That excellent book-to-be viewed leadership as a “shared, interactive process” with “greater equality between the team builder and the other members of the team” (1993, p. 144). Using that premise, the authors built a strong case for collaborative leadership with many wonderful insights regarding its dynamics and its implementation as a collective practice. More recently, Jean Lipman-Blumen's *The connective edge: Leading in an interdependent world* (1996) developed connective leadership into a compelling global view with visionary new rules for a world “where inclusion is critical and connection inevitable.” In a world torn by interdependence and diversity, Lipman-Blumen offered an integrated theory of connective leadership to address the many, complex global challenges of our day.

The emergent model of leadership does not exclude the man or woman of vision or charisma; rather, it makes organizational leadership the responsibility of many able leaders. As Robert K. Greenleaf (1977, p. 63) noted, “to be a lone chief atop a pyramid is *abnormal and corrupting*. None of us is perfect by ourselves, and all need the help and correcting influence of close colleagues.” The recent scandals involving the CEOs of Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and many, many others attest to that truth. As Jean Lipman-Blumen wrote in her recent work on toxic leaders (2005, pp. 50-51), “The real tragedy of the human condition is not that we must die but that we choose to live by illusion.... Illusions are the umbilical cord linking leaders and followers.” And such illusions are expensive to the operation of human enterprises. Ernest Becker (1973) asserted that deep within us lies an existential angst that is at the core of the human condition. Leaders are only too happy to appear godlike to give us the illusion that they can help us overcome our limitations, our mortality, our death. The allure of toxic leaders plagues us today as it has particularly during the past century. The metaphor of the leadership team (or, better still, the leadership circle) offers us a way of addressing the concerns of Becker, Greenleaf, and Lipman-Blumen while building toward a more collaborative and inclusive future for our species.

Hal Leavitt (1975, p. 67) suggested that we would all be better off if groups rather than individuals made up the basic building blocks of organizations. Groups increase commitment, improve decision-making, and encourage innovation. An interpersonal environment that encourages broad participation, mutual respect, and the use of influence rather than authority may be more easily established within groups. Group members might thus experience a heightened sense of ownership and pride. “In an information society, leadership involves communication and interaction. It is not an act; it is a

dialogue. The tasks belong to the group, and leadership roles are shared by group members” (Gardiner, 1988, p. 140).

Today, interdisciplinary groups are accepted as sound organizational responses to the solution of complex, global problems. Teamwork helps group members frame the problems and see the texture of issues with greater insight and understanding. The information-processing university requires the use of interdisciplinary teams building bridges between the disciplines and encouraging collaboration across society as a whole (Gardiner, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1999). New organizational forms that encourage collaboration will be required to adapt to this information-processing era. As Leavitt noted, “Groups can serve as hierarchical leaders of other groups” (1975, p.75). That organizational vision within higher education could begin at the top of the college or university hierarchy with two groups: the presidential leadership team and the board of trustees. What changes in perception of theory and practice have taken place between college and university leaders of 1988 and those of 2003 regarding collaborative leadership at the top?

### Presidential Teams

In the summer of 2003, a survey was mailed to 100 college and university presidents representing a broad spectrum of institutions, but focusing primarily on leading research universities and liberal arts colleges as had the earlier study of 1988. Sixty-two (62) of those 100 surveyed responded – a lower response rate than the 1988 study (80%). Research universities and liberal arts colleges were represented somewhat evenly in 2003 as they had in the earlier study. Unfortunately, a much larger percentage of those surveyed in 2003, almost half, chose not to be identified by name and institution in any future publications – very different from the 1988 study where almost all respondents chose to be cited by name and institution. This difference is, I believe, worthy of note and later analysis regarding the 1988 and 2003 survey results.

The questions asked of each president were as follows:

- To what extent do you think it is important for a college or university president to be a good team builder/leader?
- What is required to be a good team builder/leader?
- Who are the critical members of the presidential team?
- What are the characteristics of an *effective* presidential team?
- What do you see as the major obstacles to effective team functioning?
- What team-building ideas/strategies might you suggest to an incoming college or university president?
- What do you see as the role of the president as team builder/leader with regard to the board of trustees?
- What recommendations would you make to an incoming college or university president with regard to service on the board of trustees?

The first six questions were part of the 1988 study; the last two questions were added to the 2003 survey to include a focus on the relationship of the president with his/her board of trustees particularly in the role, if any, as team builder/leader.

Regarding the first question -- to what extent it is important for a college or university president to be a good team builder/leader -- there was agreement across the 1988 and 2003 surveys. Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president of The George Washington University, responded for most presidents in the 2003 survey when he said, "It's critical. Presidents must conserve their time and energy to focus on key issues and events. Without organizational alignment, no president can be successful. So building the right team and nurturing it is essential if a president is to lead rather than manage." Frances D. Fergusson, president of Vassar, summed it up well for the 2003 cohort: "vitally important!" The word "essential" was found in the responses of over 75% of the group. There was consensus that the job of president required more and more effort as team builder/leader. There was slightly more unanimity on this emphasis in 2003 than in 1988.

Question two asked what was required to be a good team builder/leader. Responses varied here. Reverend L. Biondi, S.J., president of St. Louis University, suggested "discernment, courage, openness to others, compassion along with realism, and a deep common sense attitude with an equal amount of social justice." President Fergusson of Vassar identified: "good listening skills; respect for others; willingness to lead, but to hear concerns; sense of fun; building a sense of common purpose." William M. Chace, president of Emory University, stated: "open mind; ability and desire to learn from others; deference." A president of a liberal arts college from the Pacific Northwest who chose not to be identified in the study's report identified: "vision; discipline; clarity; being a good listener and motivator." Jehuda Reinartz, president of Brandeis University, saw the requirements of being a good team builder/leader as being "the ability to listen, to project a clear vision, and to be decisive."

While differences between the surveys existed, both groups saw the president in the role of team builder/leader as embodying openness, listening, courage, and clarity of purpose. Art Levine, now president of Columbia Teachers College, replied to the 1988 survey with the charge: "Begin with a dream!" A group without a clear and compelling vision will not emerge as a united team. The 2003 cohort emphasized listening as a key communication skill -- more than advocacy of the institution's vision. Perhaps societal expectations of a college or university president had changed from 1988 to 2003. Possibly, the servant leader -- more listener than teller -- was indeed emerging as a viable leadership metaphor (Gardiner, 1988). Regarding question three, identifying the critical members of the presidential team, the same key positions appeared on both lists.

While the number of persons serving on a presidential team varied depending on size and complexity of institution, it was generally concluded by survey participants both in 1988 and in 2003 that the team should include line officers who reported directly to the president. In his comprehensive study of management teams, Belbin (1981, p. 116) of Cambridge University observed that a group of six team members was optimum for

effective leadership teams. Most leadership teams identified by presidents from the 2003 sample were larger – from 8 to 12 (or more) in number.

In the 1988 survey, Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame University, identified the members of his team as the individuals heading up academic affairs, graduate studies and research, student affairs, university relations, and financial affairs. Greater inclusion appears to be the pattern today with individuals such as “presidents of the faculty, staff, and student governing association” being included by President Biondi at St. Louis University, as well as legal counsel, secretary to the college/university, alumni relations officer, key faculty leaders cited by many other presidents. The pattern of including all vice presidents and deans appears to be growing from the 1988 sample – thereby increasing the size of the presidential team in 2003.

Question four focused on the characteristics of an effective leadership team. Oscar C. Page, president of Austin College, saw these characteristics as “good listening skills, good communicators, creating an atmosphere of trust and caring, hard workers.” President Trachtenberg of George Washington University added, “They know when to seek the president’s counsel and when not to. They know what to tell the president because he’ll need to know, and what not to tell him because he’ll never need to know.” James Wagner, president of Case Western Reserve University, saw the characteristics as being “communicative, productive, able to celebrate others’ accomplishments, and committed to a common vision.”

As in the 1988 survey, trust was seen as being critical in the development of effective teams. Richard M. Cyert, then president of Carnegie-Mellon University, described the effective presidential team as a “group that trusts each other and can work together and has the welfare of the total institution as its major objective.” The effective leader sets the stage for an atmosphere of trust by operating openly and creating an atmosphere in which all participants are winners. Trust involves the license to disagree openly. Past president of Carleton College and Swarthmore College, John W. Nason emphasized the importance of “free and open argument without having to be diplomatic,” but “having a united stand before the public once decisions have been made.” Honesty and the free flow of information remain important to effective team functioning.

Question five asked the presidents to identify the major obstacles to effective team functioning. “Human nature” drew the most votes in the new sample. Among the answers were, “protecting one’s turf,” “poor relationships among team members,” “cliques,” “jealousies, rivalries, and petty ambitions,” “inability or unwillingness to see the university as a whole,” “poor leadership,” “lack of trust,” and “selfishness.” Human nature, particularly territorial imperatives in protection of turf, seemed to lead to climates of lack of trust and/or confidence, and the lack of a sense of clear and cogent purpose for the enterprise as a whole. Some of the symptoms that might be observed in any group needing team development included lack of a shared vision, unnecessary duplication of effort, competition, low morale, and poor communication. These symptoms signaled the need to regroup, to refocus attention on the fundamentals of team development. Possibly,

presidential teams, like all other human groups, should consider some leadership development interventions.

Question six asked the 2003 leaders for the team-building ideas/strategies they might suggest to incoming college or university presidents. Effective team-building depends on communication, human relations, and consensus-building skills of chief executive officers. Suggestions from the 2003 sample included: from President Shaw of Syracuse University, "Read my book: the *Effective College President*"; from the president of an elite Midwestern school who did not want to be cited by name, "1) Don't do a retreat; 2) Have regular short, focused meetings as a group and lots of one-on-one meetings; 3) Encourage team members to talk directly to each other." Another president of an elite liberal arts school in the East said, "listen carefully, work collaboratively, don't try to please everyone – but do respond to people honestly." The president of a strong liberal arts school in the West, who asked not be identified, said, "Be clear about institutional goals and priorities and insist that divisional goals derive from and contribute to the larger goals. Require lots of team conversations, debate, deliberation. Make being a contributing team member part of the evaluation." Another president of a major research university in the South suggested that a "five-day retreat with president, vice presidents, deans, and other key administrators is in order, with a non-university member as facilitator, laying out the president's vision and strategic goals for the next year."

The ideas/strategies were diverse and basically aligned with those of the 1988 sample. One strategy not addressed by the 2003 group that was emphasized by the 1988 cohort was that of delegation. Delegation is a time-honored management technique, considered by most administrators of the past to be indispensable to presidential success. It is also critical to the success of the team members, who as senior executives function best under conditions of reasonable autonomy. The late President Howard R. Bowen of the University of Iowa and Claremont Graduate School maintained in 1988 that the president should delegate everything possible, leaving himself or herself "no defined residual responsibility." The chief executive officer's role is to do whatever needs to be done that is not covered by others, and that, he noted, still leaves the president "with a heavy agenda." Could it be that the climate on campus had become more political and less trusting? Could it be that presidents no longer were willing to be quoted for the record since whatever they said might be used against them by some constituency? Something appeared to have changed as noted by lack of returns, by much less of a willingness to be cited for the record, and by more guarded responses – including a lack of attribution to delegation in the 2003 survey.

In an article entitled "Presidents as Public Teachers," Robert L. Payton (1997, pp. 55-59) noted that a "sickness of purpose" was at the center of today's presidential experience. "Educational leaders are no longer seen as leaders, but as managers who lack vision and value only the bottom line." He continued, "developing and advancing institutions primarily is about mission and purpose and moral values. Only secondarily is it about resources." Payton concluded with the challenge that "it is the president's responsibility to return us to the historic tasks, the issue captured in the title of the famous Harvard 'Red Book,' published in 1945: *Education in a Free Society*. Education in a free

society: That's what it's all about." The gradual loss of original meaning of purpose and its replacement by corporate symbols and rhetoric may be part of a larger, systemic problem.

In the 1988 survey, Father Hesburgh of Notre Dame noted that "the simple fact is the president can't lead as large and complicated an institution as a university all by himself." The knowledge executive must be an accomplished generalist with a broad understanding of many issues and an in-depth technical knowledge of very few. Thus, the president must rely on others. More recently, President Hesburgh (2001, p. B20) was cited as asking, "Where are college presidents' voices on important public issues?"... "Today's college presidents," he noted, "appear to have taken Voltaire's advice to cultivate their own gardens." In concern, he emphasized, "we cannot urge students to speak out unless we are willing to do so ourselves." He concluded with the thought that while many have forgotten, college presidents "are the custodians of institutions where independent, ethical, and compassionate thinking must flourish." Survey results for the 2003 sample serve to echo Father Hesburgh's concerns about the voices (or rather *lack of voices*) of our current college and university presidents. This matter will be considered again after we have reviewed data regarding the president's relationship (if any) as team builder/leader with his/her board of trustees.

#### Board of Trustees

Richard T. Ingram, president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, wrote in his *Trustee responsibilities* that "the governing board is the institution's legal owner and final authority. It holds the institution's financial, physical, and human assets and operations in trust for future generations....No board decision is likely to have greater impact on the institution or system than selecting the chief executive....Board members must find the middle ground between policy oversight and policy implementation. Micromanagement is as irresponsible as neglect and inattention" (1997, pp. 2-11).

Robert K. Greenleaf (1974) in his essay on *Trustees as servants* cautioned that "trustees commonly do not function in a way that builds trust. Nominal trustees, as they now commonly function, serve two major purposes: they satisfy the legal requirement, and they provide the cover of legitimacy....The mere presence of trustees, in the absence of the performance which their place and title implies, does not generate trust – enough trust to give our society the stability it needs" (pp. 10-11). Regarding the role of the trustee chairman, Greenleaf added, "First and foremost, the trustee chairman will *not* be an officer of the administration....The chairman would be *primus inter pares*, not chief. He would be first among equals and responsible to his peers, the trustees" (pp. 23-24).

In another sector, a shift from "sovereign to steward" was evident in the nonprofit area with Rotary International's new district governor's roles and responsibilities undergoing radical change toward increased *primus inter pares*, servant leadership (Gardiner, 2001, 2002). Arun Gandhi's message at the 2002 ILA conference was one of *surwarda*, which translates into "the welfare of all." My grandfather said, "The purpose of every leader is

to look at the welfare of all of the people ... leadership at any level needs to be concerned with the welfare of all” (Cherrey, et al., 2003, p.6). The board of trustees and the trustee chair would need to expand their vision to include the society to whom they have pledged their trust as trustees.

Richard Hackman noted, “No one person has sole responsibility for team leadership. Leadership is provided by anyone who helps create and maintain the performance-enhancing conditions, regardless of whether that person happens to hold a formal leadership role” (2002, p.33). As Lipman- Blumen and Leavitt asserted, “The time is ripe for large, hierarchical, well-ordered organizations to make room for small, egalitarian, disordered hot groups” (1999, p.xiii). Gardiner’s (1999) research on winning centers and institutes at America’s leading research universities demonstrated this organizational truth. During these days of rapid change within colleges and universities, the creativity and flexibility shown by boards of trustees and, particularly, by the trustee chair and president toward implementation of true shared governance are an important key to determining the levels of institutional success.

Irving Wladawsky-Berger, IBM’s vice president for technical strategy and innovation, emphasized that the “emerging era is characterized by the collaborative innovation of many people working in gifted communities just as innovation in the industrial era was characterized by individual genius” (Friedman, 2005, p.93). Effective collaboration is essential for the future growth and development of American colleges and universities. Noting the struggles of the U.S. Olympic basketball team in 2004, Joel Cawley of IBM, remarked, “Star for star, the basketball teams from places like Lithuania or Puerto Rico still don’t rank well versus the Americans, but when they place as a team -- when they *collaborate* better than we do -- they are extremely competitive” (Friedman, 2005, p.251). Presidential leadership teams and boards of trustees will need to become more collaborative, *truly* collaborative, if American higher education is not to lose its edge in the global commons.

With these opening thoughts, let’s consider the responses of the 2003 sample of college and university presidents to the two new questions regarding the role of the president to the board of trustees, specifically in the context of his/her role of team builder/leader. The seventh question of the survey focused on what the president saw as his/her role as team builder/leader with regard to the board of trustees. Answers varied showing a wide range of orientations to the role of the president vis-à-vis the board of trustees and its chair and pointing to a wide range of institutional and personal options regarding the president’s membership on the board of trustees.

President Jehuda Reinartz of Brandeis University represented the broadest consensus when he noted that the president is the “chief representative of the administration to the Board who must make clear his/her vision for the institution and how it will be achieved.” A president from an elite Pacific Northwest liberal arts college that asked not to be identified by name or institution saw the president’s job as one of “working with the board to get policy and larger goals, [and to] educate the board about issues facing higher education and the college. Focus on clarity, enthusiasm, and good communication.”

President Chace of Emory saw the job of president as “to nudge, to hint, to lead when possible; to be aware of deficiencies.” Reverend Biondi, S.J., President of St. Louis University, said that the “president is a coach, director, organizer of Board. Trustees often look to the President who must give all new trustees an orientation to the university’s general structure and information and education on how it works.” Importantly, President Trachtenberg of The George Washington University added that, “Most presidents are ex-officio members of their boards. What they’ve got to do is forge a good working relationship with the chairman so that both know what their roles are. Presidents need to make certain that board committees are actively engaged with the senior managers in areas they oversee.”

Regarding the eighth and last of the survey questions, presidents identified the following recommendations they would make to an incoming president with regard to service on the board of trustees. President Trachtenberg emphasized, “Make certain the president and the chairman agree on their respective roles and responsibilities. It’s nearly impossible to provide boards with too much information. As you’d want yourself, ‘no surprises,’ not even good ones.” Cautioned Vassar’s President Frances Fergusson, “Don’t let Board micromanage. Emphasize their policy role.” President Chace of Emory suggested, “Don’t serve. They appoint you.” President Oscar Page of Austin College emphasized, “Work hard to secure Board members who understand the college and make expectations of the Board clear to everyone.” A president from an elite West Coast university who chose not to be identified by name said that “the board is the president’s most important constituency, so clarity of mutual goals is essential.” The president of an elite liberal arts college in the Midwest said, “I am opposed to this. We changed our bylaws at the college so that I am no longer a member of the board.” Emphasized the president of another liberal arts college in the Southeast, “If you ask for advice from the board, then either do what is suggested or explain why you did not.”

Trust is critical in the development of effective teams – presidential and trustee. As Richard M. Cyert, then president of Carnegie-Mellon, noted in 1988, “the effective presidential team is a group that trusts each other and can work together and has the welfare of the total institution as its major objective.” The leader, whether president or trustee chair, sets the stage for an atmosphere of trust by operating openly and creating an atmosphere in which all participants are winners. This is difficult, however, because of the flaws of human nature. As Nannerl Keohane, president of Wellesley College and Duke University, said in 1988, “Turf building and inferiority complexes” are central obstacles. Overweening ambition and end runs to trustees were cited as evidence of pathology among team members. “Sensitivity, persistence, sense of purpose, and ability to *listen* to people” were viewed as important antidotes to this pathology by President Keohane.

The structure of academic institutions and the current climate do not strengthen the power of individuals – including that of college and university presidents. Multiple constituencies, a segmented departmental structure, and the historic supremacy of faculty in decision-making on many fronts are but a few of the constraints placed on

academic administrators. The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse described the most effective leaders as almost invisible. When a successful leader has accomplished his/her goal, the followers believe that they did it themselves. The president's major role emerges as the institution's chief consensus builder – the embodiment of the corporate will. Burns (1978, pp. 425-26) found that the work went beyond communicating ideas to teaching values and uniting the enterprise in the pursuit of “higher” goals. Real leadership, as Burns viewed it, was ennobling (1978).

As Payton (1997, p. 59) recalled, “It appeared for a while in the 1960s that we were remaking our institutions into government agencies. It now appears that we are remaking them into business corporations. Both distortions betray the mission of the university.” Added Payton, “Developing and advancing institutions is about mission and purpose and moral values. Only secondarily is it about resources.” Chester Barnard understood this when he called for a balance between effectiveness – getting things done – and efficiency – looking after the welfare of people (1938). As the late John W. Gardner (1963, p. 127), a mentor and friend, would say, it is time “to renew the moral order.” “Motivation runs down. Values decay...Transformational leadership renews” (Gardner, 1990, pp. 121-122). In the *Report of the Commission on the Academic Presidency: Stronger leadership for tougher times*, the elite commission headed up by Chairman Gerald L. Baliles, emphasized that “a strong presidency is not a panacea for the demands on the nation's colleges and universities. But without a stronger presidency, these demands stand little hope of being met” (1996, p. xiii). With a few exceptions, this comparative study of college and university presidents does not paint the picture of a strong presidency. It finds the state of affairs to be of concern as college and university chief executive officers increasingly focus on the bottom line of resources and appear to lack the courage to speak out on issues affecting their institutions and our larger society – state, regional, national, and international. As the *Report* correctly saw a decade ago, “Instead of a leader, the president has gradually become juggler-in-chief, expected to meet an endless stream of individual needs and special demands” (1996, p. 11).

The problem is compounded by a betrayal of mission of the college or university by the chief executive officer. Why would the academic community enthusiastically support a president who had lost his/her moral bearing, focusing all his/her energy on the bottom line of resources? Without integrity being demonstrated on the part of the president, including the voicing of clear moral values and a cogent mission for the institution, why would the university community rally to strengthen the presidency? This question only grows in importance as the president is increasingly needed to serve as a team builder and leader for the university bringing it onto a “new global playing field for multiple forms of collaboration” (Friedman, 2005, p. 177). Integrity, clear moral values, a cogent interdisciplinary vision, and collaborative skills will be more important than ever for American higher education to maintain global advantage.

Paul Olscamp concluded that “our universities are critically important because tomorrow's leaders will most likely be developed there, and how we influence them will make that world better or worse. And that is why university presidents cannot and should not avoid the moral issues confronting them. It is also why they need to be clear about the

moral principles to which they adhere, and about how these principles justify the actions they take” (2003, p. 120).

The problem requires attention now in a systematic manner – possibly, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges could call for a national academic dialogue on the need to strengthen the moral presidency before more damage is done to what is increasingly a value-free ship of state in American higher education. Possibly, it is our responsibility as academics to call for that value-centered leadership through vigorous shared governance efforts at our own colleges and universities. Helping our presidents reclaim their voices and their moral center is important to the future of American higher education and to the future of the civilized world.

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