Enabling University Leaders to serve as role models for sustainable development

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Abstract

In the UK, evidence suggests that the implementation of sustainable development within universities has largely resulted from the work of one or two champions driving change, often bottom-up. While such approaches bring success, culture change and the institutionalisation of SD, requires strategic coordination, the buy in of senior managers and the support of the University Board (HEFCE, 2008). Unfortunately, involvement of the broader group of senior managers has often been lacking; SD is frequently seen as 'low priority' by governing bodies.

This paper will present the outcomes of a small-scale project (funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England) undertaken to address this perceived gap in SD engagement. The project involved working with Board/Council Members at two distinctly different universities to enable participants to increase their knowledge of SD, explore leadership behaviours to support culture change and secure the commitment of a wider staff base to SD and carbon reduction. Workshops were then cascaded to other institutions.

A description of the project approach is provided with analysis and reflection on outcomes; emerging leadership behaviours for SD are presented. The conclusion suggests that the project is raising the profile of SD and is transferable to other institutions. The paper will be of interest to those who are implementing sustainable development within higher education.

Leadership for sustainability in the UK

In the UK evidence suggests that the implementation of sustainable development across the higher education sector is patchy (Dawe et al, 2005): some universities have made considerable progress; others far less. In those institutions where there has been substantial development it has often been as a result of 'one or two people' (HEFCE 2008, p xi) acting as champions to push the agenda forward (Copeland, 2008; Jones et al, 2010). Campus greening initiatives (usually but not always led by Environmental Managers within universities) have had some success (Sterling &Scott, 2008) however getting university leaders to accept that education for sustainable development needs to be addressed across the entire curriculum has been a greater challenge. Too often initiatives which have gone beyond 'campus greening,' have been perceived as '*just another course or research project, expendable if it does not pay its way' (Wals and Blewitt 2010, p70).* Only a few UK universities have implemented holistic approaches to sustainable development; again these have largely been driven by a handful of champions advocating change. Evidence, that the most senior staff within universities are exemplifying effective leadership of this agenda, is rarely apparent. Martin and Jucker (2005, p21) suggest that such leaders are not only scarce but the qualities needed to enable sustainability: *'humility, respect for all forms of life and future generations, precaution and wisdom, the capacity to think systemically and challenge unethical actions,'* is in short supply.

It is frequently the case that sustainable development is seen as a low-priority agenda item for a University's executive team; it rarely appears on the agenda of the Board or Council, as part of the governance process. Such a low priority might be excused in the context of a sector which has been tackling so many other pressing

issues, but to continue to regard sustainability as a peripheral activity would be short-sighted. Disappointingly many university leaders fail to see the implications of one of the most significant global issues, for the well being of society; they rarely see the implications of sustainable development for education and their role in particular.

Feedback from Universities that Count (2009) evidences that integrating 'Corporate Responsibility and Environmental Management' into institutions remains a common challenge at sector level (p37). Low scoring areas of integration (in the results of their benchmarking survey of universities) include:

- Integration of corporate responsibility and environmental management into strategic decision making
- Building corporate responsibility and environmental management into the development of senior managers. (p11).

Their report also highlights that the Higher Education sector average, is considerably below the business average in these areas.

Such lack of attention is surprising given the number of clarion calls since *Agenda 21* (UNCED, 1992), for universities to engage with sustainable development. It is particularly surprising in England, where the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has strategically sought to increase engagement (HEFCE, 2005; HEFCE, 2008).   Further HEFCE's carbon reduction strategy (HEFCE, 2010) which sets challenging carbon reduction targets for the sector, underscores that sustainable development is a key strategic issue for all institutions which requires '*behavioural change and new ways of working'* (p15). HEFCE reminds university leaders that SD '*extends beyond the traditional estates function'* to other activities '*including teaching, research and public communications*' (2010, p8). At the same

time the assertion is made that *'carbon management is a key strategic issue, so it is a crucial area for governors who should be informed and involved in decision making on the institution's approach to reducing its emissions'.*

The reference to governance is an important point: the Board has to be the main advocate for sustainability if employee engagement programmes are to succeed (Brighter Planet, 2010). It is perhaps a lack of advocacy to date on the part of those with governance responsibility, which has partly contributed to a lack of strategic engagement. It is undoubted that the institutionalisation of sustainability (which requires culture change and transformational ways of working) has to be strategically coordinated by university leaders but such coordination also needs the support of Board Members (HEFCE, 2008) who offer the potential to ensure change.

Against this background this paper provides an account of a Leadership Governance and Management Funded (LGMF) project which was applied for in 2010, to raise the profile of sustainable development with Board members and senior teams. The project aimed to address a perceived internal gap (in terms of leadership development for sustainability) within the two institutions collaborating on the project, before rolling out the approach to other universities. Thus, the secondary aim of the project was to meet a gap in the external context: there is little published work on leadership for sustainable development; there are few initiatives which engage this stakeholder group and enable them to reflect on their contribution to sustainable development.

The overarching aim of the project was to work with the target group to increase awareness of the broad sustainable development agenda, with a specific focus on

leadership behaviours to embed sustainable development, and actions to achieve challenging carbon reduction targets.

The objectives were to:

- provide participants with the opportunity to increase their knowledge;

- explore the breadth of concerns;

- identify their potential role in supporting culture change;

- Develop approaches to securing commitment to carbon reduction and sustainable development.

The LGMF project journey

The original project proposal committed the project team to running two workshops at University A and two at University B. Learning would then be cascaded to two further universities. The plan was to target the first workshop at the level of the Board or Council, followed by a second workshop for the senior management team. This was subsequently revised.

Buchanan and Boddy (1992) highlight the need for the change agent to manage three parallel strands of activity: the content agenda, the control agenda and the process agenda.

The development of workshop process and content was undertaken at the same time as 'backstage activities' (Yukl and Falbe, 1990) which included inspirational appeals to enhance participation; consideration of the role of the client; a contracting meeting with the Chair; preparing the ground for change through communication with stakeholders.

In developing the content, consideration began with the literature in relation to leadership and particularly leadership for sustainable development. Consideration was also given to the development/learning model, the influencing process, and how to facilitate change.

There is a vast literature on leadership but very little which considers leadership for sustainability, with the exception of a few texts such as Parkin (2010) and Marshall et al (2011), neither of which, focus specifically on university leadership. Whenever the topic of leadership in relation to sustainability is addressed, it is usually in the form of a plea by authors for more effective and strategic leadership of sustainability. A lack of coherent leadership for sustainable development is usually cited, at the same time as acknowledgements that most of the drive and innovations that have occurred, have been down to the work of champions.

The 'Sustainability Leadership Relational Model' (Ferdig, 2009) enabled the project team to develop ideas around possible leadership behaviours which might result from the project; Yukl's, work on leadership and particularly the 'Essence of Effective Leadership,' (p 456-7) was also informative. Although Yukl does not explicitly address sustainability, the socially responsible leader he describes should have sufficiently compatible behaviours to lead sustainable development. Reviewing the general leadership theory literature served an important purpose in preparation: it enabled the project team to not only explore ideas and linkages but increased confidence in being able to talk leadership as well as sustainability with the target audience. The decision was made however, not to impose any of the models, or leadership behaviours during the workshops, but to let behaviours emerge from participants.

In parallel during preparation, consideration was given to process. It would undoubtedly have been easier to select a 'stand and deliver' method (and some participants might have preferred to be told the solution), but a passive approach to learning was rejected, as was using cognitive dissonance (Festinger et al, 1956), which might have been too negative and challenging in the time available. Outcomes from deliberations were an emphasis on a social learning approach (Bandura, 1977) and the potential of action learning (Revans, 1982), with flexibility for participants to adapt the approach to suit their own institutional context.

Other considerations in the preparatory stages included:

- Clarifying the role of the client (the University, the chair, the Vice Chancellor)

- The anticipated outcome (the timeframe prohibited an outcome of SD embedded throughout but developing a process, model and increased advocacy, were achievable)

- The need to understand more about how the Board operates

- World views and the need to surface these

- The transparency of the learning model (to enable cascade)

- Influencing approaches and ways to 'sell' participation ('thought leadership,' for example).

Institutional workshops were preceded by a contracting meeting, which at the first institution involved the VC, the Chair and the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Estates) the Project Leader and the external facilitator (as credible expert). Potential approaches to project delivery were discussed and time frames. Subsequent contracting meetings (at other institutions) did not always include this combination of participants.

At the first contracting meeting the concept of 'thought leadership' and 'action learning' were appealing to the Chair. These concepts influenced all further workshops. The decision was also made that workshops should include the Board and wider university team (at both workshops) to increase engagement.

A detailed facilitation plan was developed for each workshop. Table 1 gives a brief outline of the plan, although plans were much more detailed.

Workshop 1	Workshop 2
Presentation on drivers for SD and current institutional context	Recap of workshop 1; reminder about SD and institutional carbon emissions
Identification of challenges and opportunities	Reviewed progress on goals and actions; identification of further actions required; identification of leadership behaviours
Individuals ranked top 3 priority areas	Presentation on leadership behaviour
Reflection on which three were most scored; amalgamation of priorities as appropriate	Identified leadership behaviours in relation to strategic management then sustainable development
Consideration of world views	Considered types of behaviour which blocked progress; types to take progress forward.
Individual commitments	Plenary
Action plans developed in small groups: what, why, how and by whom.	Concluding comments from VC/Chair

Table 1. Outline of workshop activities

Each plan was approved by the Chair before the workshops.

A substantial amount of time was taken negotiating participants' availability. The first workshop commenced January 2011 with a gap of at least three months between workshops.

The workshops were facilitated by the project leader, the external consultant and the two Environment Managers (from each institution) working as a team.

All outputs from the workshops were captured; notes were made of discussions. The delivery team also engaged in post-workshop reflection, gathering summaries of reflective learning.

The next section offers a description of the process, with commentary. Discussion draws from the experience of the process at the first institution, where the process has been completed; the first workshop (with small variations) was then repeated at the partner university and a 'cascade' university.

Workshop One

Carefully scripted briefings were produced for the VC and the Chair; they introduced the project and its significance. This made their roles easier but also ensured that they were 'on message'. The first input was a brief presentation which articulated a persuasive rationale for engagement using an approach to win 'hearts and mind (rather than evangelism), and emphasising the payback. The content included the external context, the drivers (legislative, financial, educational), the institutional context with facts and figures on utilities, carbon emissions, achievements to date, and incentives for engagement.

Participants were then asked to identify the challenges and opportunities of the agenda, as individuals generating a substantial list which was captured on a whiteboard.

Again, as individuals, participants were asked to approach the list and vote for the three items (by marking the board), which they perceived as critical to be taken forward. Votes were scored and through a process of negotiation (and collapsing of

some items), the group agreed which were the three to four top-scoring opportunities they wanted to take forward to the next stage.

A 'World views exercise', was then introduced to change the dynamic and increase energy levels. Participants were asked to place themselves on a line which represented a continuum between an Arcadian view (deep green ecological view of our relationship with the planet and an Imperialist view (man can use resources and is clever enough to fix the problems). They were asked to discuss with those on the line, the rationale for their position, relative to others. They were also asked to consider how world views influence leadership and decision making. Engagement with the exercise was fairly enthusiastic (after some initial discomfort by a few) and participants were interested to see how their colleagues placed themselves. Surprising for the observers were the numbers of the senior team who identified with an Imperialist view. Surprising for some participants was the reflection that world-views impact on all interactions and decisions. As one commented ' *I am a bit surprised to see that my colleagues views are very different to my own – a bit worrying given that they bring these views to the table.*' No attempt was made at this point to influence world views, or suggest that particular views might be right or wrong, rather the exercise was used to surface the range of perspectives and get participants articulating their personal opinion. The facilitators however noted the challenge of working with so many 'imperialists' and reinforced that world views impact on all decisions. Attention was also drawn to the importance of remaining aware of the diversity of perspectives; the need to be open to new perspectives and; the need to accommodate others as they developed actions and embarked on a journey of change.

Participants were then asked to select groups to develop actions, in relation to one of the 'top challenges.' In these groups, they first fleshed out the issue and with careful facilitation, articulated the what, why, how, by whom, and when. Table 2, offers an example of an output from one worked up action, in relation to the strategic objective of increasing engagement with SD. Example of Action/Development of a strategic objective

Table 2: Developing a Strategic Objective – staff, student and Board engagement

No.	Action (Consult stakeholders research what others do)	By whom	By when
1	Consult stakeholders/ research what others do	E & ET	ASAP
2	Programme of actions (what, why, etc)	ULT	Next board
3	Communications plan (including achievements to date)	M & C and SUBU	Next term
4	VC launch/ make visible through personal examples / champion	VC and others	Next term
5	BIG statement(s) -remove printers -close car parks -carbon sculpture -bicycles	Board/ ULT/ SU	2011-2012
6	Roll out of events	ULT/ SU	2011-2012 (ongoing)
7	Recognition of success/ rewards/ role models	ULT	2011-2012
8	Embedding in new student recruitment campaigns	M & C	2011-12

Participants were asked, at any time during the workshop, to post 'personal commitments' on a board. Participants were generally enthusiastic in relation to the activity; some returned to the board more than once. Examples included:

- I will ask questions about the carbon footprint of new buildings on campus,

- Go paperless

- Talk about SD more

- Learn to use an iPad and stop asking for paper copies

- Turn off PC when not in office

- Better facilitate options for staff to stop driving to work

- Carry out research into how students studying in the X building feel about its use

- Consider SD implications of each Board decision ("SD" impact as a standing item on cover sheet of Board papers)

Articulating personal commitments was seen as a useful part of the process. One participant commented: '*Now I have written it, I'll have to stick to doing it*'. Some commitments (the last, for example) have implications which impact beyond the personal; all are important as a precursor to role modelling behaviour.

Workshop two

The second workshop was scheduled for three months later. Again a detailed facilitation plan was approved; a further warm up process began with reminders and information distributed. The content included a recap of workshop one, further slides to enable members to visualise carbon and then group work to review progress, consider learning from actions, and to identify further actions and leadership behaviours. The recap was important, as there were some variations in attendance

between the two workshops. Participants needed quite a bit of prompting and were rather slow to engage with reviewing actions. It was evident that some actions had slipped off the radar; some had made little progress. A brief presentation of leadership theory was then included followed by an activity which required participants to focus on those leadership behaviours which maintain progress, those which accelerate progress, and those which block. Finally, they were asked to think about 'infra-structure' needed to move forward; a plenary session captured overall comments on direction and issues.

Evaluation and learning so far

This has been a challenging project. The project's original aim of delivering a workshop for the Board and then a second workshop for the senior management team (which seemed quite easy to complete), was never realised. This was in the end a positive, resulting in increased interaction and more action plans. It also gave the Board a chance to collaborate with a wider group of staff and served to reinforce that this is a collective responsibility. The down side was that a greater number of participants meant that it was easier for some not to participate, or leave early (absence being less noticeable).

Post workshop reflection concluded that the format of workshop one worked well. Engagement was enthusiastic but careful facilitation was needed to retain focus. The greatest challenge was maintaining energy levels, given that the workshop took place after a lengthy Board Meeting. The project team also noted that facilitating an event which involves participants who are at such a high level (in career terms) is highly stressful, particularly when delivery is within your employing organisation. Using an external facilitator (as part of the team) who had experience of working with

government was important in terms of external credibility but also in providing anecdotes and stories which engaged participants.

All facilitators found workshop two, more difficult. It was evident that although some work had been done in between workshops, some participants had done far less, which impacted on engagement. At times, the silences were uncomfortable and it was difficult to avoid stepping in to fill the gaps, however the decision to let participants experience some discomfort, was an important one. As one participant commented: '*actually the leadership behaviour was a negative- 'forgot to take action'- hardly inspiring, will need to do better.*'

An assumption had also been made that participants would have a clear understanding of effective leadership and some understanding of leadership theory. This was not the case. As one participant suggested '*we make leadership decisions all the time but that does not mean we have ever read anything about leadership. I've learned by doing, as have many others*'. This was countered by another participant who responded '*But you haven't been **doing** sustainable development – so you need to do more learning*'. Participants did not find it easy to identify strategic leadership behaviours; frequently the discussion was pitched at the level of middle management behaviour.

The exercise which helped them to think more critically was the one which considered behaviours which maintain, accelerate or block momentum. It generated discussion and yielded positive outcomes (see example, Table 3) which fed into the plenary.

Table 3: Identifying behaviours exercise from workshop 2

Behaviours which sustain momentum	Behaviours which accelerate momentum
• Need a leader! • Passion (sharing), believing in it • Celebrating achievement • Clear sense of mission & well planned • Patience & accepting other people's work • Treat as a 'common sense' action • Rewarding & recognising • Empowering individuals • 'Highly visible' champions (including at Board level) • Being carbon conscious • Case studies/good examples to buy in to	• Positive statement of intent • Impact statement • More frequent/ regular updates/flow of information • Recognition/Incentive schemes/Prizes • Understand why you have won eco-campus award – what next? • Personalised message for individual or team e.g. carbon resp./allowance • Enthusiasm of everyone • Lead by example • Mobilise the almost 20,000 people that make up the institution
Behaviours which block momentum	**What institutional structures need to be put in place to progress activity**
• Making a big issue of it • Negativity • Lethargy/Apathy • Complacency • Cynicism • Someone else's job • Perception there is no show stopper we have to fix/absence of a burning platform • Too many messages • Inconsistent messages from Government & legislation • Non-sticking initiative before next • People too busy/ no time • "Individuals will not make a difference" • Unclear communication	• No more committees but passionate, visible Board/UET leader and ULT champions – cascading • Three new Board members to be recruited; recruit minimum of one with an interest in sustainability • Meaningful KPI's with investment to back up (measure + do something about it) • 'Stickability' – people, resource, have mandate and skill • Put into a formal project management framework – becoming more disciplined • High level performance objectives at board level • Champions at all levels and recruit to that • Sell space for non-used time • It is a good sound business case to include environment as well as VFM in all decisions • Structures are OK • Build into appraisals/part of objectives

The support of the chair and several senior staff (which is in itself a positive behaviour) was undoubted and inspiring, with clear commitment demonstrated, to leading change at both workshops. Some Board Members also expressed an interest in further engagement.

A project which involves working with Boards and senior teams is not easy particularly where the facilitators are internal to the organisation and the underlying message is that there is something they need to learn and do better. As Argyris (1991) suggests the 'smartest people' are not always pre-disposed to acknowledging that they have anything to learn. Managing the process agenda was therefore a challenge; the skills and emotional resilience needed for this were, as Clarke (1999) suggests, considerable. Working alongside an external 'expert' removed some of the pressure, but also increased work in terms of communication and coordination.

Workshop one felt more successful than workshop two. In part this was because participants were confronted with their own inaction in the second workshop, but may also have been because they did not like to reveal their lack of knowledge about leadership behaviour. So far only one institution has completed both workshops; until more have engaged it is difficult to draw conclusions. It did however give rise to a concern that perhaps the 'action' part of action learning had not been fully appreciated. In subsequent contracting meetings and workshops more attention was paid to ensuring that participants understood the approach and to reinforcing ownership of the actions.

The process and materials developed so far (although UK specific) are transferrable to other institutions, with the proviso that the content is adapted to address

institutional context and culture. In relation to the latter, cultural difference (even within UK institutions) can sometimes be huge and has to be considered in terms of preparation (warm up) and during facilitation. Further political processes are different in each institution; encountering the political has sometimes been bizarre, responding as a '*positive deviant*' (Parkin, 2010) has been necessary, as has substantial 'backstage activity' (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992).

Other points of note when considering transferability include:

- The immense difficulty of coordinating leadership development with this target group. Board Members find time in full schedules for governance; time beyond that is precious so has to be well spent.

- Access to the Board has to be negotiated through gatekeepers who play an important role in agreeing dates and communicating information in a timely way. They can slow down or block a project, or contribute wholeheartedly to success. Communication needs to ensure that they are briefed, on side and have the right information to enable them to be seen as knowledgeable and professional.

- The contracting meeting is vital to ensure that those at the top (particularly the Chair) meet the team, own the approach, and can role-model leadership at the start of the process. The contracting meeting has to be followed up with full briefing notes.

The project has already achieved the goal of increasing awareness of sustainable development (over 100 participants have been involved to date), but has it identified the required leadership behaviours? During the workshops the identification of leadership behaviours for sustainable development was sometimes disappointing

(and at times like pulling teeth) but behaviours have started to emerge. Thus participants suggest that a leader of sustainable development:

- Demonstrates responsibility for the environment in the personal and professional sphere (exemplifies passion; acts as champion)

- Exemplifies creativity in planning for the future (visioning)

- Develops a SD strategy which embraces all aspects of the business (with key performance indicators)

- Assesses all actions and decisions in relation to SD; facilitates evaluation of the consequences of different actions (better decision making/more futures oriented)

- Encourages multiple perspectives, seeking consensus, but learning from diverse views

- Identifies new ways of working and opportunities to bring in different perspectives

- Inspires hope, proactively seeks positive SD solutions

- Ensures SD is addressed on the cover of all papers which come to the Board

- Ensures Board Membership includes participants who understand and are passionate about SD

The list will continue to be shaped and refined as the process rolls out and evaluation takes place.

To date, the project has already raised the profile of SD, and resulted in affirmations of commitment by Chairs. A Deputy Vice Chancellor recently confirmed, '*sustainability is now at the top-table*.' However as a Chair commented, there is still some way to go to overcome the '*cynicism and scepticism prevalent in some*

members.' As the project cascades, the number of governors gaining an understanding of SD is increasing; the number engaged in action will also rise. The Chair of a participating institution commented: *'yesterday's session was worthwhile - in fact it was much better than I thought it would be and I can see some real upsides for University X. All the governors seem to be very positive about the result so if the objective was to engage the leadership of University X with these issues I think it can be counted as a huge success.'*

Another commented:

'*The workshops worked to put us all 'on the same page' in terms of understanding. We have made a start. We are committed to SD and understand what is required of us following the workshops. We need to do more to ensure that SD is a growing and consistent priority and that it is fully embedded in the organisation.*'

Such comments evidence capacity building but how do you evaluate the success of a project such as this and assess whether leadership behaviour is actually changing? Evaluation of the project will be the subject of a much later paper. An evaluation questionnaire and interviews will explore whether the project has:

- Achieved the goal of broadening leadership support for sustainable development
- Enabled a shared understanding of sustainable development to be developed within the institution and a greater understanding of leadership behaviours.
- Whether participants are able to identify behaviours that accelerate the embedding of sustainable development across their institution.

Finally, participants will be asked to reflect on actions and approaches which they identified during the workshops and to identify where they are on the journey, from 'not yet started' to 'fully developed.' They will be asked to identify behaviours which have been particularly successful.

Interviews with Chairs and Vice Chancellors will also explore their experience of the project and the extent to which they have noted any behaviour change, at the level of governance and executive management. The interviews will not only elicit information but will be used as an opportunity to explore whether further support and changes are necessary.

In the medium term, it should be possible to note an increased reference to sustainable development across all institutional processes and communications; a staff and student survey will test whether the concept is more broadly understood and whether leaders are truly exemplifying the agenda. In the longer term, environmental audits will capture improvements in the very tangible areas of carbon reduction, utilities, waste, etc.

At this point it is evident that the project has broadened participants understanding of the issues, their role in leading the agenda and the actions required to lead change. It could however be some time before leaders, role-model leadership behaviour for sustainable development in their day-to-day activities.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a summary of a project 'in progress' which aims to broaden leadership support for sustainable development. The project has engaged Board Members and senior teams within UK universities in action learning with a view to

developing action plans, and considering the behaviours required for SD in taking those actions forward. The action learning approach and workshops have provided participants with the space to reflect on sustainable development and engage with the topic in a way that has not been achieved previously. The approach is transferable to other institutions within the UK and beyond, providing those who lead and govern higher education institutions, are prepared to set aside the time and space to begin engagement. This project has served as a useful vehicle to raise the profile of SD within institutions, broaden understanding of the challenges, and enable some coherent action plans to be developed. More work will be required to follow those actions plans through; substantial work will be required if higher education leaders are to fully incorporate sustainable development into their day-to-day actions.

The project has particularly focused on those responsible for governance and top-level leadership within universities. It is worth remembering however that

'*A sustainability leader is anyone who chooses to engage in the process of creating transformative change with others aimed towards a more sustainable future: economically, environmentally and socially*;' (Ferdig, 2009)

Until such time as those at the top are fully 'walking the talk', others will need to continue championing the agenda.

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Acknowledgements

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