

# Adult Development and Transformational Leader

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## Executive Summary

Theories of constructive and moral development are proposed by Kuhnert & Lewis (1987), Kegan and Lahey (1984), Fisher and Torbert (1991), Palus and Drath (1995) and others as models for providing clarification and extension of how cognitive and personality differences within individuals influence leadership effectiveness. Using interviewing methods based on Constructive-developmental (CD) theory (Kegan, 1982), a sample of 32 cadets at a military institute were measured for their level of CD development and subsequent performance on an assortment of measures. CD development correlated significantly with scores on the Defining Issues Test (DIT) of moral development, peer ratings from fellow cadets, and summarized performance across a variety of military and extracurricular activities. Implications highlight the utility of incorporating a developmental perspective in the study of leadership.

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Within the discipline of psychology, many contributions toward the understanding of leadership have been made from such fields as personality, behaviorism, cognition, social psychology, and clinical psychology. Estranged from this ensemble, however, is the field of developmental psychology. Developmental theory can add much to our understanding of how certain individuals successfully communicate and influence others to follow them, by illuminating the underlying cognitive and personality structures which give rise to certain leadership behaviors. Successful delineation of the underlying developmental structures present in successful and unsuccessful leaders may contribute a great deal to existing theory and practical applications.

Many implications from previous studies support the value of integrating developmental theories in the study of leadership, yet few have made any attempt at investigating the potential of this approach. For example, early trait theorists found that emotional maturity was a trait related to effective performance that generalized across a variety of situations (Lord, DeVader & Alliger, 1986). Related traits such as stability, adjustment, and empathy enable leaders to maintain cooperative relationships with followers, as well as be more socially sensitive to their motives, feelings and attitudes. Emotionally mature leaders are less prone to mood swings, are more composed and in control, and are less defensive to criticism. These individuals are also more flexible and adaptable to the demands of various situations (Bass, 1990). Emotional maturity implies an underlying continuum of development, yet investigations beyond surface traits are scant. The structures that underlie the reasons behind why someone is more or less emotionally mature are not well understood, but a developmental analysis could shed much light on this phenomenon.

As another example, this time from the behavioral camp, consideration has been shown by literally hundreds of studies to be an important behavior for leadership success, stemming from the famous Ohio State studies. Consideration is literally being considerate of other individuals' feelings, behaving in ways indicative of friendship, mutual respect, and warmth (Vroom, 1976). The ability to empathize with others requires leaders to incorporate perspectives beyond their own, which is a skill supported only in higher stages of adult and moral development (Kegan, 1982; Rest, 1986). Individuals arrested at lower levels of development are less likely to empathize with other individuals, possessing neither the ability nor the inclination to consider the issues of multiple constituencies.

Modern conceptions of leadership have been based on the notions proposed by Burns (1978), Bass (1984; 1997) and others of transactional and transformational leadership, a theory which has had some flirtations with developmental theory (e.g. Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leadership inspires and propels followers to perform beyond human limitations and achieve great feats, where leaders actually create a relationship with their followers that mutually stimulates and elevates them to leaders, and leaders into moral agents (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders are theorized to realign the goals of an organization with its members so that both are united, by means of using vision, charisma, inspiration, and previously mentioned consideration (Bass, 1985). While the transformational leader attempts to elevate followers to their better selves through the use of inspiration and vision, the transactional leader is one who leads by reciprocal interactions with others. Contacts between leader and follower are made for the sake of exchanging something of value. The transformational style has

been shown to be the more effective of the two (Hater & Bass, 1988) actually augmenting the effectiveness of subordinates beyond that obtainable by transactional leadership. Note that to transform others and lift them to their "better selves" involves a major shift in the underlying values and assumptions of others, which results in new ways of making meaning by other individuals. This ability to help others reframe has been postulated as requiring a high level of development (Fisher & Torbert, 1991), but little work has been done to address this issue. Though Burns (1978) and Bass (1985; 1997) both identified leaders by their actions and the impact those actions have on others, what they lacked was an explanation of the internal processes which generate the actions of transactional and transformational leaders (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Research has shown what transactional and transformational leadership is, but far less is known about how or why some individuals rise to become transactional leaders, while others become transformational.

The above theories and countless others all suffer from a deficiency regarding substantive explanations of the underlying processes which enable certain individuals to exemplify more or less effective leadership styles. Social scientists know what leaders do to be effective: they behave in certain ways, in certain situations under certain circumstances. Much is still unknown, however, as to why certain individuals are more effective than others. Trait theory proved itself woefully inept at providing this answer nearly 50 years ago (Stogdill, 1948), but more recent advances in adult development theory may prove useful in filling this void.

### Constructive-developmental theory

One such theory that bridges the gap between developmental psychology and modern day conceptions of leadership is Constructive-developmental (CD) theory (Kegan, 1982; 1994), proposed by Kegan and Lahey (1984) as a means of understanding adult leadership in general, and more specifically by Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) as an alternative understanding of Burns (1978) original notion of transformational leadership. In his book, The Evolving Self, Kegan (1982) outlines a series of developmental sequences that adolescents and adults can experience. The theory resembles child developmental theories, like those by Piaget and Kohlberg, but concentrates on the adult years of an individual's life-span. Just as children learn to integrate more and more information into schemas that shape how they view the world, adults too continue to develop their constructions of reality that progress from simple to complex modes of understanding. These different levels of constructive reality in turn shape the person's behavior and interactions with others.

Development as studied under CD theory is the development of meaning-making systems, whereby the individual is thought to view the world according to how he constructs and perceives it. The theory assumes that humans construct a subjective understanding of the world that shapes their experiences as opposed to directly experiencing an objective "real" world. The construction of these perceptions is an evolving trade-off of what is subject within the person versus what is object outside the person. The structure by which people compose experience is termed subject, and can be thought of as the lens through which people view the world. As an individual develops, what was once subject becomes object. Thus over time the individual can

take an objective perspective on previous modes of understanding, while in turn being subject to a new mode of understanding.

The content of Kegan's stages is a hierarchical cycle of differentiation and integration, which resemble levels of empathy and principled decision making. Empathy involves the integration of other individuals' perspectives. Over time, individuals develop increasingly complex ways of understanding others, their feelings, and how one stands relative to others. At lower stages of CD, individuals show very little empathy towards others' feelings and perspectives. Middle stages are characterized by an internalization of other individuals' concerns, being subject to the feelings, and sometimes approval, of others. Individuals occupying higher stages of CD, while showing concern for others, are not held by other individuals' perceptions, thus they can take an objective perspective on the feelings of others. Principles that guide an individual's actions differentiate one from others. Principled decision making evolves from simple assessments of personal gain to ever more complex systems of personal and societal morals. Lower stage individuals are guided by principles of meeting personal goals, characterized by attitudes such as, "what's in it for me." Individuals at middle stages, however, are guided by principles of friendship, mutual concern for others, and some degree of ingratiation. Higher levels are characterized by more complex principles and values, such as fairness, trust, and personal integrity. As individuals develop, both their principles and their integration of multiple perspectives become increasingly complex and sophisticated.

Kegan (1982) notes that his theory of constructive-development parallels in many ways the work of Piaget and Kohlberg on the development of moral judgement. Although Piaget studied children, he nonetheless found that they progressed in 3 stages of moral behavior, from the ages of 4 to 12 (Hunt, 1993). This progression of judgement integrates more "sides" of the "story" as the subject develops — a theory which Kohlberg operationalized and elaborated upon into 6 stages of development that extend into the adult life-span. The first stages of moral development focus on direct advantages to the actor and on the fairness of simple exchanges. As development takes place, considerations of right and wrong change focus to the good or evil intentions of the parties, the party's concern for maintaining friendships and good relationships, and maintaining approval. Later stages resemble the profile referred to by Burns of the leader as a moral agent, because the individual's focus now changes to the upholding of laws, values, basic human rights, and ideals designed to optimize mutual human welfare (Rest, 1990). Both theories are similar to CD theory in that they involve a hierarchy of meaning-making structures that increase in complexity as more perspectives or "sides" are considered in a particular dilemma or situation, and Kohlberg's theory extends into adulthood. Although Kegan's framework is not limited to just moral behavior, the theories of moral development suggested by Piaget and Kohlberg are worthy of noting due to their high degree of overlap and large amount of support in the literature (Rest, 1990).

### Hypotheses

There are several advantages that can be gained by incorporating the developmental perspective into current conceptualizations of leadership. Incorporating the rich qualitative insight that can be drawn from the analysis of how an individual actually

constructs her "world view" may reveal far more about the underlying psychological structures which give rise to certain leadership styles than any behavioral survey alone can. Before this claim can be substantiated, however, studies must be conducted to discern whether there is any relationship between a person's level of development and leadership. Few studies have attempted to empirically investigate the potential for this approach, in part due to the demanding nature that such qualitative data requires in terms of collection and analysis. Particularly missing from the scant research on development and leadership are any relationships with performance-criteria. This study is an attempt to better ascertain the potential fruitfulness of incorporating a developmental analysis into the broader study of leadership.

Constructive-developmental theory has been proposed as being linked to leadership in general (Kegan & Lahey, 1984) and more specifically transactional/transformational leadership theory (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). CD theory has also been proposed as being linked with moral development (Kegan, 1982), which like CD theory involves a hierarchy of meaning-making systems that involve more and more alternative perspectives. CD measurement methods may provide a useful alternative to previous methods for uncovering who is more likely to be an effective leader. Furthermore, CD methods can reveal the underlying systems of making meaning which may show why an individual gravitates to a particular style of leadership. This information, in turn, could provide a wealth of information and utility to organizations desiring to identify, select, and train individuals for leadership roles. By understanding the ways in which one frames his relationship with others and the world around him, organizations can customize interventions to the needs of their members and facilitate their intellectual and moral growth. Therefore, this study proposes and will test the following hypotheses:

1. CD levels of development are related to the leadership ability of an individual, such that persons at higher CD levels are more effective in the attainment and execution of leadership positions.
2. Individuals occupying higher CD levels are more highly esteemed and are regarded as better performers by their peers than individuals at lower CD levels.
3. CD levels of development parallel moral development scores as measured by the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Rest, 1990).

## Method

### Organizational Setting

The present study was conducted at an undergraduate military college located in the eastern United States in the spring of 1994. The structure and function of the college provides students, also known as cadets, with individual leadership opportunities and responsibilities which include indoctrination of freshmen students, administrative duties necessary to the operation of a military unit, and management of cadet regulations and privileges. The college's emphasis on providing these leadership opportunities, combined with a collegiate setting that promotes intellectual and social growth, made it an ideal setting for such a study.

## Subjects

The focal subjects included 32 students in their junior year of college. The students were all male, ranging from the ages of 19 to 21 years old. Students in this age bracket were deemed advantageous because of their ideal age where development to adulthood should begin to take place. Other juniors also served as subjects in that they were asked to rate the focal subjects on their overall performance within their company.

## Materials

**Peer-rating forms:** A peer-rating form was created to assess the top performers in the focal groups' class. The form contained a list of everyone in the class of 1995, and 5 response options beside each name, numbered one to five. The form is designed for a respondent to rank who he feels are the top 5 performers in his company, with a 1 denoting the believed top performer, 2 the second best performer, etc. The form also requires rating the bottom 5 performers in a respondent's company, using a similar procedure. Based on the number of times a cadet was ranked first, second, ...twenty-fifth, twenty-sixth, etc. a score is computed for each cadet.

**Defining Issues Test (DIT):** The DIT is a paper and pencil test of moral judgement behavior, derived from Kohlberg's original work on moral development. The DIT contains six moral dilemmas, each accompanied by a set of 12 items that require the respondent to consider issues or questions which he/she feels should be considered in resolving the problem(s) raised in the moral dilemma. The items for the DIT were derived from extensive interview material and scoring guides developed in connection with each dilemma, and represent considerations that are diagnostic of different schemes of fairness or justice (i.e. moral judgement stages) (Rest, 1986). There are several scores that can be derived from responses on the DIT, but the most used is the P index, which stands for "principled morality." The P-score is interpreted as the relative importance that subjects attribute to items that measure principled morality, and prior studies have found test-retest correlations ranging from .71 to .82 (Rest, 1990).

**S/O Interviewers:** The most vital "material" to this study was 4 interviewers trained according to Kegan's Subject-Object interviewing methodology (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman and Felix, 1987). Each interviewer received extensive training and rehearsal on a number of test subjects before interviewing subjects at the study site. Each interview was recorded on tape and later transcribed. Note-cards with emotional cues were used to help guide and focus the discussion on events the subject experienced that related to the cue of interest. Examples of cues include "anxiety/nervous", "success", "angry", and "moved/touched".

**Initiative Scale:** In addition to peer ratings, a criterion was needed that would be indicative of the individual's leadership abilities. This scale, called initiative, is actually a composite score based on a number of different military and extracurricular activities. These activities include participation in athletics, band, the school newspaper, officer positions, sergeant positions, investigative committees, honor court positions, and several other military leadership activities. Subject Matter Experts from the college assigned point values according to participation, level of involvement, and prestige in these different activities. These points were then accumulated, and the individual was

assigned an "initiative" score. The scale was named initiative because the more military/extracurricular activities an individual participates in and/or seeks officer positions in, the more "initiative" that individual is said to have.

### Design and Procedure

S/O Interviews: The Subject/Object (S/O) interviews were conducted by 4 trained interviewers during the spring semester of 1994. A total of 32 interviews were conducted. All interviews were recorded on tape. Subjects were explained that the recordings were for research purposes only, and their responses would be held in strict confidence. The interview began with a brief introduction and explanation of the interview's purpose, which is to gain a better understanding of the individual's past experiences that he regards as important and how those experiences have shaped his view of leadership and the world around him. To assist the subject's memory and guide discussion, the individual was given a set of index cards that each have an emotional cue written on them. Throughout the interview, the interviewer probes the subject with questions aimed at providing a greater understanding of why the subject felt the way he did in that experience. Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed and then reviewed independently by four trained judges. The judges then met to discuss their ratings and assigned a final score based on group consensus. Scores can range from 1 to 16. For more detail on the interview and scoring procedure, see Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman and Felix (1987).

DIT Administration: The DIT was completed by the focal group during the 1994 spring semester. The tests were administered during one of the cadets' regular military science class periods, and instructions were given for how to take the test. Subjects were given all the time they needed, and clarification was provided when necessary. Subjects provided the last 4 digits of their social security number for identification purposes, but were assured that their responses would be held in strict confidence.

Peer rankings: Peer rankings of leader effectiveness were collected as indicators of each cadet's effectiveness as a leader during the fall '94 semester. Each focal cadet was ranked by each of the other 20-30 focal cadets in his company. A score was computed for each cadet based on the number of times he was rated first, second, ...twenty-fifth, twenty-sixth, etc.

Initiative scores: Archival records kept on each cadet were used to determine the frequency and level of involvement cadets exhibited in various military and extracurricular activities available at the college. Based on a point system devised by subject-matter experts, a composite score was computed for each cadet.

### Results

Descriptive statistics for the DIT P-scores, peer-ranking scores, initiative scores and S/O scores are provided in Table 1. The inter-rater reliability (MacLennan, 1993) for the panel, calculated as the average correlation between raters (Spearman-brown corrected for the number of raters) is .88, and is provided with the correlations of all rater-pairs in Table 2.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics for each variable used in the study

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Dev.</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>	<u>Sample Size</u>
S/O score	7.75	3.17	2	13	32
Peer ranking	108.44	15.52	77.6	138.2	30
Initiative	4.47	4.01	0	14	32
DIT-P score	31.83	13.46	8	59	26

**Table 2:** Inter-correlations and Inter-rater agreement among the 4 judges.

	<u>Judge 1</u>	<u>Judge 2</u>	<u>Judge 3</u>
<u>Judge 2</u>	.68		
<u>Judge 3</u>	.65	.70	
<u>Judge 4</u>	.61	.59	.59
<u>Average r</u>	.64		
<u>Spearman-Brown</u>	.88		

Hypothesis 1 proposed that the higher a cadet was in his level of constructive development, the more successful he would be in the attainment and execution of various leadership positions, as indicated by the initiative score. This hypothesis was tested by using a Pearson correlation coefficient, and was supported with an  $r = .34$  ( $p < .05$ ).

Hypothesis 2 proposed that the more developed a cadet was in terms of constructive development, the more popular and esteemed that cadet would be as judged from his peers. This hypothesis was also tested using a Pearson correlation coefficient, and was supported with an  $r = .35$  ( $p < .05$ ). Two cadets were excluded from this analysis due to missing data, thus the sample size for this correlation was 30.



Hypothesis 3 proposed that scores of CD development parallel those obtained on the DIT, such that higher CD scores would be associated with higher scores on the DIT P-scoring system of the DIT, and lower CD scores would be associated with lower DIT P-scores. This hypothesis was again tested using a Pearson correlation coefficient, and was supported with an  $r = .34$  ( $p < .05$ ). Six cadets were excluded from this analysis due to missing data, making the sample size 26 for this correlation. All 3 of the above test results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Correlations of CD scores with criteria from hypotheses 1 through 3.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Pearson r</u>	<u>Significance level</u>	<u>Sample Size</u>
Initiative	.34	.028	32
Peer ratings	.35	.027	30
DIT P-score	.34	.046	26

### Discussion

The significance of hypothesis test 1 indicates that there is a relationship between a person's level of constructive development and his level of involvement in various military and extracurricular activities. Involvement in these activities was scored for more than mere participation, since each activity offers the opportunity to display one's leadership abilities. This is why the measure was named "initiative", instead of just "participation" or "involvement." High energy level, which is associated with someone possessing a high level of drive and initiative, has been noted as a common trait among leaders for some time (Bass, 1990). The attainment of a high score on the initiative scale, however, requires a talent beyond even high energy level, because the leadership positions available at the college must be earned. A cadet must be judged by his peers and superiors as exceptional in the ability to lead and inspire others to attain many of the higher positions scored on the initiative scale. The significance and direction of the correlation suggests that highly developed cadets are better equipped to meet the needs and expectations of their followers, as well as accomplish the goals they set out to achieve.

The approval and esteem from one's peers as an exceptional performer is further supported by the confirmation of hypothesis 2. The more constructively developed a cadet, the more esteem that cadet received from his fellow peers within his own company. These cadets know as well as anyone who their best and worst performers are, thus their evaluations are not to be taken lightly. Although peer-ranking as a criterion has often been cited as indicative of leadership emergence (Lord, DeVader & Alliger, 1986) instead of performance, the fact that raters were asked to judge the top performers in their company suggests that some element of actual performance must also lie within the domain of this criterion. This is even further supported when considered alongside the confirmation of hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 3 could be thought of as a test of the validity of constructive developmental theory of the adult life-span. The direction and significance of this relationship, despite the poor statistical power, suggests that there is indeed an underlying meaning-making system which is tapped by both theories. Furthermore, there does appear to be an element of moral judgement ability that is associated with higher CD levels, which are proposed by Kuhnert & Lewis (1987) as indicative of transformational leadership ability. The relatively small size of the correlation, although typical of research in the social sciences, suggests that there are also unique aspects of CD measurement methods which are not tapped by the DIT. Thus although moral development and constructive development are related, they are by no means similar enough to justify using one as a surrogate for the other.

### Qualitative data

The quantitative results are encouraging for future prospects of incorporating the developmental perspective into understanding leadership, but they hide the qualitative richness of the interviews themselves. The scorable "bits" of dialogue (Lahey et al, 1987) reveal how the subject actually constructs or makes sense of the world around him, and better illustrate the different stages of constructive-developmental theory than the quantitative scores alone can.

One of the cues used in the interviews which best displays the different stages of development is "success." When asked to recall an experience that created a feeling of being successful, lower-level cadets, in terms of CD scores, gave responses typical to these:

[What makes you feel successful?] I guess just to stay in order...beat the system...getting out of things [for example] if I can escape a penalty successfully.

I was happy [to be picked] to be a corporal, you have to be able to shape other people and train them and stuff...but after the first week.. it's doing menial jobs like check for flashlights at night, I hated that. After that, being a corporal just wasn't fun at all...but it was nice to have stripes on your sleeve.

[Is recognition important in feeling successful?] It [is] for me because I really respect my [mentors]. I really like them a lot, and I got to be really close with them. So having their gratitude or recognition for [succeeding] is something really big for me. I was really happy that they were glad about it.

These are all illustrative of the lower levels of constructive development. In the first two quotes, the subjects frame their views of success within the realm of personal goal achievement. These individuals feel successful when they have won or acquired something of value. There are not many sides or perspectives taken by these individuals – no parties with vested interests to consider other than one's own. Thus there is little empathy for others, and the principles upon which decisions are made derive largely from goal achievement.

The last quote shows someone who has more empathy than the previous two, but is still seeking to acquire something of worth, concentrating on social esteem and approval from others. The philosophy which guides people in these low to mid-stages is one where the individual will do what it takes to earn respect from others, but requires knowledge of how those same people feel about him. While this is certainly one of many ways to interpret a successful experience, it leaves little to be desired when one is in charge of understanding and inspiring others towards action. Higher levels of development, indicative of transformational leadership, advance the individual from perspectives of goals and esteem to a system of personal values, as illustrated below.

[How do you determine if you've been successful?] I usually give myself a grade on what I did...it makes you feel more assured that you did something well if someone brings it out to you...[but] you should supply your own self-confidence...try not to let what other people say influence you too much.

[How do you evaluate success?] If I'm proud of what I've done...not only that, if I can live with the decisions I've made, whether they're right or wrong, in my view or someone else's, if I'm proud of what I've done... and I held to my convictions... it would be worse for me to compromise my standards than to not achieve the goal.

Here we see a much more encompassing world view than the previous views. These individuals have goals, but they are not defined by them. These individuals also have relationships with others, but again they are not driven by them. What these individuals are driven by and subject to is a system of personal values. The standards these individuals live by defines how they view the world around them, and guides their decisions and subsequent behavior. Values and integrity are not mere rhetoric to individuals in these stages of development, indeed they are defining aspects of the individual's persona. Being able to act according to these end values are precisely what Burns (1978) states as crucial to the transformation of others in the process of leadership. Only if a leader is free from her own personal agenda and the competing loyalties of others can she objectively evaluate her own performance and be able to potentially transform others and become transformational leaders (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987).

### Conclusions

Taken together, developmental theory, particularly constructive-developmental theory, seems to show promise as an explanatory tool for understanding leadership, in particular, transformational leadership. Hypotheses 1 and 2 found significant relationships between CD levels and leadership performance, suggesting that CD and effective leadership are related. Hypothesis 3 confirmed the relation between CD and moral development as proposed by Kegan (1982), which helps in validating both the methodology used by the researchers and the overall construct of constructive-development. Studied alongside the qualitative richness of the interviews, CD theory reveals a level of understanding previously unavailable. CD methods actually reveal how the leader constructs meaning, which may have a wide variety of behavioral ramifications.

Beyond performance, however, this study can only postulate as to what behaviors are exhibited by individuals occupying different levels of CD. No one theory of leadership was strictly adhered to in this study, because the primary purpose was to discern whether CD had any viable contribution to the understanding of leadership. Future studies should better incorporate constructive development with existing leadership theory than was attempted here, and use CD methods alongside measures more traditional to leadership research, such as behavioral surveys. Measures such as the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1989) or the Management Practices Survey (Yukl, Wall & Lepsinger, 1990) should be studied alongside CD results to determine the relation between leadership behavior and development, the amount of variance in behavior accounted for by level of CD development, and the amount of variance unique to CD that behavioral surveys cannot explain.

This study has laid the groundwork for a promising new line of research within the study of leadership. Moving beyond theoretical postulations of CD and leadership (e.g. Drath & Palus, 1994; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987), this study has empirically linked CD theory with indicators of successful leadership performance. The balance of qualitative and quantitative methodology, alongside the theoretical background provided by Kegan (1982), Kohlberg (as cited in Rest, 1986) and others, makes CD theory an encouraging catalyst for advancing leadership studies towards a new level of understanding.

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