

TRUST-BASED LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Article history

Received date : 19-6-2026

Revised date : 20-6-2026

Accepted date : 25-7-2026

Published date : 1-8-2026

To cite this document:

Amin, N., Mansor, M., & Mohd Baharan, M. F. (2026). Trust-based leadership effectiveness in educational organisations: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 11 (85), 305 – 316.

Abstract: *Leadership effectiveness in educational organisations has often been explained through leadership styles and formal leader behaviour. However, such explanations may understate the organisational conditions through which leadership influence is translated into teacher trust, collaboration, agency, and professional learning. This conceptual article develops a trust-based framework for understanding leadership effectiveness in educational organisations. Using structured literature mapping and conceptual synthesis, 21 selected articles published mainly between 2022 and 2026 were analysed and grouped into five conceptual clusters: leadership effectiveness and leadership models; organisational trust; culture and psychological safety; collaboration and teacher leadership; and teacher professional learning, agency, and motivation. The synthesis indicates that leadership effectiveness is not a direct outcome of leadership style alone, but a trust-based socio-organisational process. The proposed framework positions organisational trust as the core mechanism that converts formal leadership authority into teacher autonomy, psychological safety, collaboration, and professional participation. Trust-based collaboration and teacher leadership then support teacher professional learning, agency, and motivation, which indicate enacted leadership effectiveness. This article contributes to educational leadership scholarship by integrating fragmented discussions on leadership models, trust, collaboration, and professional learning into a coherent conceptual pathway for future empirical investigation.*

Keywords: *Trust-based leadership effectiveness; organisational trust; teacher leadership; teacher professional learning.*

Introduction

Leadership effectiveness remains a central concern in educational leadership scholarship as schools are expected to improve teaching quality, strengthen teacher professionalism and sustain organisational improvement. Traditionally, leadership effectiveness has been explained through leadership styles such as transformational, instructional, distributed and learning-centred leadership. These models remain useful because they explain how leaders shape direction, influence teachers and support instructional improvement. However, recent literature suggests that leadership effectiveness cannot be understood through leader behaviour alone. Rather, leadership becomes effective when formal leadership practices are translated into organisational conditions that enable teachers to trust, collaborate, exercise agency and engage in professional learning (Gümüş et al., 2026; Long & Xia, 2025; Çakır et al., 2026).

This issue is important because schools are not merely administrative structures, but social and professional organisations. Leadership practices may appear strong at the formal level, yet their influence depends on how teachers interpret and respond to them. A leader may communicate vision, provide instructional direction and promote improvement, but such practices may produce surface-level compliance if teachers do not experience trust, autonomy and psychological safety. Khan (2025) shows that trust in the school principal and job autonomy mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher work performance, while Bellibaş and Gümüş (2023) and Karacabey et al. (2022) link teacher trust with professional learning and collective efficacy. These studies suggest that leadership effectiveness is mediated by teachers' relational and organisational experiences.

Trust therefore deserves stronger conceptual attention in educational leadership research. In many discussions, trust is treated as a desirable relational outcome, but not always as a central mechanism of leadership effectiveness. This is problematic because trust shapes whether teachers engage in professional dialogue, share practice, accept feedback and participate in school improvement. Savaş et al. (2025) connect leadership for learning with psychological safety and professional learning, while Karakose et al. (2025) emphasise mediating factors between principal leadership and teacher professional learning. Without trust, leadership may produce compliance but not sustained professional commitment.

The challenge becomes more critical in hierarchical educational organisations. Schools require authority, accountability and coordination, yet excessive dependence on hierarchical control may restrict teacher voice and weaken collaborative capacity. Lee and Ip (2023) show that professional learning communities can support informal teacher leadership within hierarchical school contexts, while De Jong et al. (2022) and Polatcan (2024) link collaboration, distributed leadership, teacher agency and professional learning. Thus, the issue is not whether schools should abandon hierarchy, but whether hierarchical structures can become trust-based professional cultures.

Despite these developments, the literature remains conceptually fragmented. Studies on leadership models, teacher trust, psychological safety, professional learning communities, teacher agency and professional learning often develop in parallel rather than as an integrated explanation of leadership effectiveness. This creates a conceptual gap: fewer conceptual works explain how these elements operate together as a trust-based pathway to leadership effectiveness. Therefore, this article develops a conceptual framework of trust-based leadership effectiveness by synthesising recent educational leadership literature from 2022 to 2026. It contributes by reframing leadership effectiveness from a leader-centred construct into a trust-

based socio-organisational process that positions organisational trust as the core mechanism linking leadership practices, teacher agency, collaboration and professional growth.

Research Objectives

This conceptual article aims to develop a trust-based framework for understanding leadership effectiveness in educational organisations. Specifically, the article is guided by three objectives:

- a) To critically examine the limitations of leader-centred explanations of leadership effectiveness, particularly in accounting for how leadership influence is translated into teacher trust, agency, and professional learning.
- b) To synthesise recent educational leadership literature on organisational trust, teacher collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional learning as interrelated mechanisms shaping leadership effectiveness.
- c) To propose a conceptual framework that positions trust-based collaboration and teacher professional learning as key pathways through which leadership effectiveness is developed, enacted, and sustained.

These objectives structure the article through three connected movements: critique, synthesis and conceptual framework development. This approach enables the article to move beyond describing leadership models and to offer an integrated explanation of how leadership effectiveness operates through trust-based organisational conditions.

Literature Review and Conceptual Synthesis

Rethinking Leadership Effectiveness in Educational Organisations

Leadership effectiveness in educational organisations has often been discussed through established leadership models such as transformational, instructional, distributed, and learning-centred leadership. These models remain useful as they explain how leaders shape school direction, influence teacher practices, and support organisational improvement. However, recent literature indicates that leadership effectiveness should not be reduced to leadership style or leader behaviour alone. Gümüş et al. (2026) show that educational leadership models continue to develop across different conceptual and methodological traditions, while Long and Xia (2025) demonstrate that transformational and instructional leadership become meaningful when they support teacher professional development through self-efficacy and organisational culture. Similarly, Çakır et al. (2026) highlight the importance of linking instructional leadership with teacher leadership and distributed leadership. This suggests that the key issue is not merely which leadership style is effective, but how leadership becomes effective through organisational conditions.

The limitation of leader-centred explanations is that they often under-explain how leadership influence is translated into teacher trust, agency, learning, and school improvement. Khan (2025) shows that transformational leadership influences teacher work performance through trust in the school principal and job autonomy, while Bellibaş and Gümüş (2023) position teacher trust as an important condition for teacher professional learning. Karacabey et al. (2022) also connect principal leadership, teacher trust, and collective efficacy with professional learning. These studies challenge the assumption that leadership effectiveness flows directly from leader behaviour to teacher outcomes. Instead, leadership effectiveness should be understood as a mediated process shaped by teachers' psychological, relational, and organisational experiences.

Organisational Trust as the Core Mechanism

Organisational trust is central to leadership effectiveness because it determines whether leadership influence is perceived as legitimate, supportive, and professionally meaningful. In this article, trust is conceptualised not merely as a relational value, but as a mechanism that converts formal leadership influence into teacher autonomy, psychological safety, collaboration, and professional learning. Khan (2025) provides a strong basis for this argument by showing the mediating role of trust between the school principal and job autonomy. Bellibaş and Gümüş (2023) similarly link teacher trust with professional learning, while Savaş et al. (2025) connect leadership for learning with psychological safety and teacher learning. These studies suggest that trust is not simply an outcome of good leadership; it is the condition through which leadership becomes educationally productive.

A trust-based perspective also prevents leadership effectiveness from being understood as mere compliance. A leader may be visionary, strategic, or instructionally focused, but if teachers do not trust the leader, leadership influence may remain superficial. Teachers may follow formal instructions without engaging deeply in professional reflection, shared inquiry, or improvement. At the same time, trust-based leadership does not mean the absence of structure, accountability, or direction. Schools still require clear goals and professional expectations. The issue is whether these structures are enacted through control or through professional trust. Özdemir et al. (2023) show that cultural factors shape how leadership affects teacher instructional practices, while Lee and Ip (2023) demonstrate that informal teacher leadership can emerge within hierarchical contexts when professional learning communities are supported. Thus, trust-based leadership transforms formal authority into professional participation and shared responsibility.

Trust-Based Collaboration and Teacher Leadership

Trust is evident in the quality of collaboration within educational organisations. Collaboration should not be seen merely as teachers attending meetings or participating in formal professional development. Meaningful collaboration involves professional dialogue, shared inquiry, feedback, and a willingness to examine practice openly. De Jong et al. (2022) emphasise the role of teacher collaboration in teacher learning, while Lee and Ip (2023) show that professional learning communities influence informal teacher leadership in hierarchical school contexts. Ho et al. (2023) further demonstrate that teacher leadership is enacted through interaction and participation in networked learning communities. These studies indicate that collaboration is not simply an activity, but a professional culture enabled by trust.

This argument is important because leadership effectiveness cannot depend solely on the formal leader. If leadership remains concentrated in the principal or senior leadership team, school improvement may become overly dependent on individual authority. Research on distributed leadership challenges this limitation by positioning teachers as active contributors to school development. Polatcan (2024) links distributed leadership with teacher agency and professional learning, while Awodiji and Felicia (2025) connect distributed leadership with school goal achievement. Çakır et al. (2026) also integrate instructional leadership, teacher leadership, and distributed leadership in explaining teacher professional learning. This evidence suggests that leadership effectiveness is strengthened when trust enables leadership responsibility to be shared across professional relationships.

However, trust-based collaboration must be distinguished from performative collaboration. Schools may have PLCs, committees, and professional development programmes, but these

structures do not automatically produce professional learning. Collaboration becomes meaningful only when teachers experience psychological safety to question practice, share difficulties, and engage in critical reflection. Savaş et al. (2025) highlight psychological safety as a condition for leadership for learning, while De Jong et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of professional dialogue in collaborative learning. Therefore, collaboration should not be evaluated by the number of formal structures, but by the quality of professional interaction and its contribution to teacher learning.

Teacher Professional Learning, Agency and Motivation as Indicators of Leadership Effectiveness

Teacher professional learning is a key indicator that trust-based leadership effectiveness has been enacted. Leadership may appear strong at the formal level, but it becomes substantively effective only when it changes how teachers learn, think and improve their practice. Bellibaş and Gümüş (2023) connect learning-centred leadership, teacher trust and professional learning, while Karakose et al. (2025) examine mediating factors between principal leadership and teacher professional learning. Liu and Hallinger (2024) further show that department leadership influences teacher professional learning. These studies indicate that teacher professional learning is not merely an individual activity, but an organisationally shaped process influenced by leadership, trust and professional structures.

Teacher agency and motivation strengthen this pathway. Professional learning requires teachers to act as active agents rather than passive recipients of reform. Bellibaş et al. (2022) connect instructional leadership with teacher practices, while Polatcan (2024) links distributed leadership with teacher agency and professional learning. Alt (2023) highlights the role of professional and psychological factors in teachers' instructional engagement, while Long and Xia (2025) emphasise self-efficacy and organisational culture in teacher professional development. These studies suggest that teachers are more likely to learn and improve when leadership creates conditions of trust, support and professional meaning.

Taken together, the literature supports the view that trust-based leadership effectiveness develops through the interaction of leadership practices, organisational trust, collaboration, teacher leadership, professional learning, agency and motivation.

Methodology

This article employs a conceptual methodology based on structured literature mapping and conceptual synthesis. As the aim is to propose a conceptual framework rather than test empirical hypotheses, the methodology focuses on identifying, classifying, and integrating relevant literature on trust-based leadership effectiveness in educational organisations. This approach is suitable for conceptual articles as it enables researchers to clarify concepts, synthesise fragmented bodies of knowledge, and propose new relationships between constructs (Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016).

The literature corpus comprised 21 selected articles published mainly between 2022 and 2026. This corpus was not intended as an exhaustive systematic review, but as a purposively bounded body of literature for conceptual framework development. The selection prioritised studies that were recent, theoretically relevant, and directly related to the key constructs of the proposed framework. In line with conceptual review approaches, emphasis was placed on depth of conceptual contribution rather than numerical breadth (Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016). The articles were identified through purposive literature mapping using scholarly search

platforms, publisher databases, DOI records, and citation tracking. The search was guided by keyword combinations related to leadership effectiveness, organisational trust, teacher leadership, teacher collaboration, teacher professional learning, psychological safety, and teacher agency. One article served as a conceptual umbrella to frame recent developments in educational leadership models, while the remaining articles were classified as core or supporting literature according to their contribution to the trust-based framework. This selection ensured that the article remained focused on educational organisations and the specific mechanisms through which trust-based leadership effectiveness is developed.

The selection was guided by three main criteria. First, the article had to relate to educational leadership, school leadership, or leadership effectiveness in educational organisations. Second, it had to contribute to at least one key construct in the proposed framework, such as organisational trust, teacher autonomy, psychological safety, collaboration, teacher leadership, distributed leadership, professional learning, agency, or motivation. Third, it had to support a trust-based explanation of leadership effectiveness, either directly through trust-related constructs or indirectly through mechanisms that explain how leadership influence is translated into teacher and organisational outcomes.

The 21 articles were then grouped into five conceptual clusters: leadership effectiveness and leadership models; organisational trust as a mechanism; culture, hierarchy, and psychological safety; collaboration and teacher leadership; and teacher professional learning, agency, and motivation. This clustering enabled the literature to be analysed as interconnected evidence rather than as isolated studies. Through this process, the synthesis moved beyond a descriptive review and focused on how the selected literature collectively explains trust-based leadership effectiveness.

The synthesis process involved three stages. First, the selected articles were mapped according to their main constructs, contribution, and role in the article. Second, the articles were compared across the five conceptual clusters to identify recurring patterns, conceptual overlaps, and explanatory mechanisms. Third, the synthesised patterns were integrated into a conceptual pathway that explains how leadership practices contribute to leadership effectiveness through organisational trust, teacher collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional learning.

As a conceptual article, this study does not involve primary data collection, respondents, fieldwork, or statistical analysis. The findings should therefore be understood as synthesised conceptual results derived from the mapped literature and used to inform the proposed framework.

Findings from Literature Mapping and Conceptual Synthesis

The literature mapping and conceptual synthesis produced five key findings. These are not empirical results, but synthesised conceptual patterns drawn from selected literature on trust-based leadership effectiveness in educational organisations. The selected studies were grouped according to their conceptual contributions to leadership effectiveness, organisational trust, school culture, collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional learning.

Table 1: Key Findings from Literature Mapping and Conceptual Synthesis

Conceptual Cluster	Key Supporting Articles	Main Constructs	Synthesised Finding	Role in the Conceptual Framework
Leadership effectiveness and leadership models	Gümüş et al. (2026); Long and Xia (2025); Çakır et al. (2026)	Leadership models, transformational leadership, instructional leadership, distributed leadership	Leadership effectiveness should not be explained only through leadership styles, but through the Organisational mechanisms that make leadership effective.	Establishes the need to move from leader-centred explanations to trust-based leadership effectiveness.
Organisational trust as a mechanism	Khan (2025); Bellibaş and Gümüş (2023); Karacabey et al. (2022)	Trust in principal, teacher trust, autonomy, collective efficacy, professional learning	Trust functions as a key mechanism that connects leadership practices with teacher autonomy, professional engagement and learning.	Positions Organisational trust as the core mechanism of the proposed framework.
Culture, hierarchy and psychological safety	Özdemir et al. (2023); Lee and Ip (2023); Savaş et al. (2025)	School culture, hierarchical context, psychological safety, leadership for learning	Leadership effectiveness is shaped by school culture and psychological safety, particularly in hierarchical educational organisations.	Explains how trust-based leadership transforms hierarchy into professional participation.
Collaboration and teacher leadership	De Jong et al. (2022); Ho et al. (2023); Polatcan (2024); Ghamrawi et al. (2024); Awodiji and Felicia (2025)	Teacher collaboration, professional learning community, teacher leadership, distributed leadership, teacher agency	Trust becomes enacted through collaboration, professional dialogue, teacher leadership and shared responsibility.	Positions collaboration and teacher leadership as pathways through which trust-based leadership is enacted.
Professional learning, agency and motivation	Dasci Sonmez et al. (2025); Karakose et al. (2025); Liu and Hallinger (2024); Alt (2023); Abedi and Ametepey (2025); Andan and Baguio (2025)	Teacher professional learning, agency, motivation, self-directed learning, support structures	Leadership effectiveness becomes visible when teachers learn, exercise agency, remain motivated and improve professional practice.	Treats teacher learning, agency and motivation as indicators of enacted leadership effectiveness.

Based on the synthesis, the findings indicate that leadership effectiveness is shaped by the interaction between leadership practices, organisational trust, teacher autonomy, psychological safety, collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional learning. These findings form the

basis for discussing the proposed trust-based leadership effectiveness framework in the following section.

Discussion and Proposed Conceptual Framework

The findings of this conceptual synthesis indicate that leadership effectiveness in educational organisations should not be understood as a direct result of leadership style alone. Transformational, instructional, distributed, and learning-centred leadership remain theoretically relevant, but their effectiveness depends on whether they create organisational conditions in which teachers trust, collaborate, exercise agency, and engage in professional learning. This challenges a narrow, leader-centred view of leadership effectiveness, which often assumes that leadership influence flows directly from the formal leader to teacher outcomes. Recent studies instead suggest that leadership influence is mediated by trust, autonomy, collective efficacy, psychological safety, and professional learning (Khan, 2025; Bellibaş & Gümüş, 2023; Karacabey et al., 2022; Savaş et al., 2025).

The main argument of this article is that organisational trust functions as the core mechanism of leadership effectiveness. Trust should not be treated merely as a positive relational value or as an outcome of a good leadership climate. Rather, it is the mechanism that converts formal leadership authority into professional participation, teacher agency, and shared responsibility. This is especially important because educational organisations are often hierarchical. While hierarchy provides structure, accountability, and direction, excessive reliance on control may weaken teacher voice and collaborative capacity. Therefore, the issue is not whether schools should abandon hierarchy, but whether leadership can transform hierarchy into a trust-based professional culture. Lee and Ip (2023), Özdemir et al. (2023), and Savaş et al. (2025) support this argument by showing the importance of school culture, psychological safety, and professional learning communities in shaping leadership influence.

Based on the synthesis, this article proposes that trust-based leadership effectiveness operates through six interconnected components. As shown in Figure 1, school leadership practices provide initial direction, but direction alone does not ensure effectiveness. Leadership becomes effective when school leadership practices generate organisational trust. Trust then strengthens teacher autonomy and psychological safety, enabling meaningful collaboration and teacher leadership. Through this pathway, teacher professional learning, agency, and motivation become indicators that leadership effectiveness has been enacted within the professional life of the school.

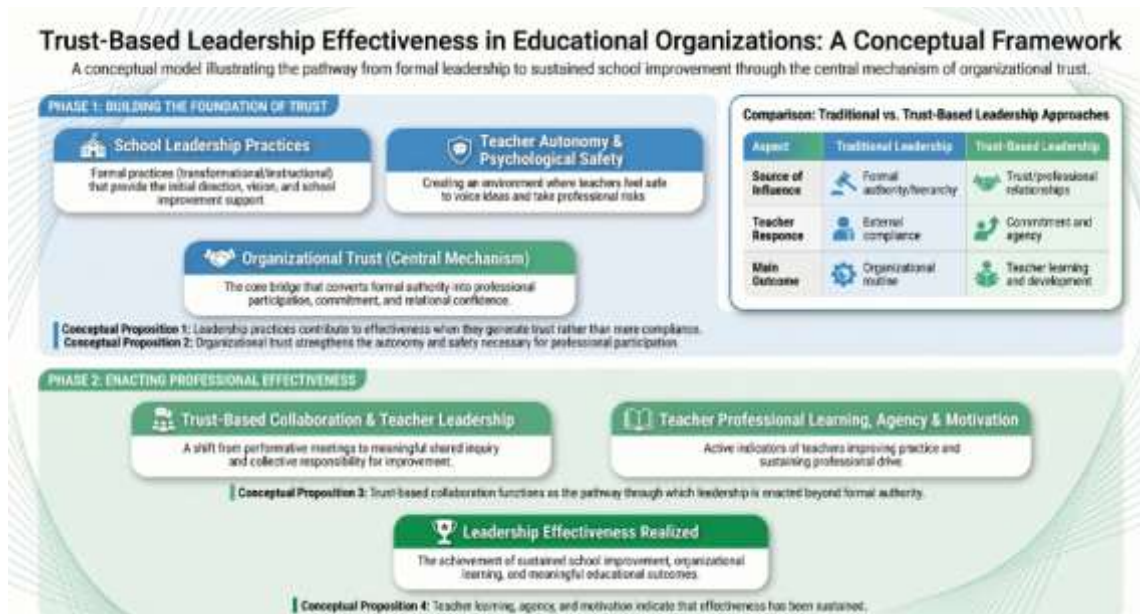


Figure 1. Proposed Trust-Based Leadership Effectiveness Framework

Figure 1 presents the proposed trust-based leadership effectiveness framework. It demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is not solely a direct result of leadership style, but a socio-organisational process shaped by school leadership practices, organisational trust, teacher autonomy and psychological safety, trust-based collaboration and teacher leadership, teacher professional learning, agency and motivation, and leadership effectiveness. In this process, organisational trust serves as the central mechanism linking formal leadership practices with professional participation and shared responsibility.

The central logic of the framework is that trust transforms formal leadership authority into professional commitment. When teachers trust their leaders, they are more likely to express ideas, engage in professional dialogue, collaborate meaningfully, and exercise teacher leadership. Trust-based collaboration thus becomes the pathway through which leadership is enacted beyond formal authority, while teacher professional learning, agency and motivation serve as indicators that leadership effectiveness is embedded in the professional life of the school. This interpretation aligns with studies linking collaboration, professional learning communities, distributed leadership and teacher leadership with teacher learning and school improvement (De Jong et al., 2022; Ho et al., 2023; Polatcan, 2024; Çakır et al., 2026).

The proposed framework offers four conceptual propositions. First, leadership practices contribute to leadership effectiveness when they generate organisational trust rather than mere compliance. Second, organisational trust strengthens teacher autonomy and psychological safety, both necessary for professional participation. Third, trust-based collaboration and teacher leadership act as pathways through which leadership is enacted across the organisation. Fourth, teacher professional learning, agency and motivation indicate that leadership effectiveness has been established and sustained in educational organisations. These propositions are conceptual statements intended to guide future research on trust-based leadership effectiveness, rather than empirical claims.

The theoretical contribution of this framework is its integration of previously fragmented discussions on leadership models, trust, collaboration, teacher leadership and professional learning into a coherent conceptual pathway. Instead of focusing solely on which leadership style is effective, this article explains how leadership becomes effective through trust-based organisational conditions. In practical terms, the framework recommends that school leaders move beyond direction, supervision and task distribution by building trust, protecting psychological safety, supporting teacher autonomy and establishing meaningful collaborative structures. As the framework is conceptual, future research should empirically validate it across different educational contexts and develop appropriate instruments to measure trust-based leadership effectiveness. Further studies may also investigate how cultural, hierarchical and contextual conditions influence the way trust transforms formal leadership authority into professional commitment and sustained school improvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article contends that leadership effectiveness in educational organisations should be understood not simply as the result of leadership style, formal authority, or individual leader competence, but as a trust-based socio-organisational process. The conceptual synthesis demonstrates that leadership becomes effective when school leaders build organisational trust, strengthen teacher autonomy and psychological safety, encourage meaningful collaboration, and support teacher leadership and professional learning. Trust is therefore positioned as the core mechanism that transforms leadership from direction to participation, from compliance to commitment, and from formal authority to shared professional responsibility. The proposed framework contributes to educational leadership scholarship by integrating previously fragmented discussions on leadership models, trust, collaboration, teacher agency, motivation, and professional learning into a coherent explanation of how leadership effectiveness is formed, enacted, and sustained. In practice, the framework reminds educational leaders that sustainable improvement cannot be achieved through control alone. It requires professional conditions in which teachers feel trusted, valued, and empowered to learn, lead, and improve practice. Thus, trust-based leadership effectiveness offers a more human, relational, and professionally grounded way of understanding effective leadership in contemporary educational organisations.

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