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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave Hennessy: Welcome to The Hennessy Report. I'm Dave Hennessy. Today's guest is Kim Scott, the founder of Radical Candor and a book by the same name. Kim has become one of the world's foremost authorities on giving coaching and guidance to employees. She has an amazing career story from the diamond business in Russia to an executive at Google, and she shares all of her insights that she learned over her career and how she applies it to her work today. Next up on the podcast is Katie Kulikoski, the Chief People Officer at Brightcove. And now, our conversation with Kim Scott.

Kim, welcome to the podcast.

Kim Scott: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Dave: Well, before we get into *Radical Candor*, all the great work you've done, why don't you just summarize your career for us? You have done so many things from diamonds to novelist to CEO, founder. I mean, there's so many things. How would you summarize Kim Scott's career?

Kim: So probably random would be the shortest answer. I've been very lucky. I had a lot of cool opportunities. I was interested in arms control in college, and that took me to Russia. And working in Russia on arms control stuff kind of blew up after the coup. And I wound up taking a job for a diamond company, starting a diamond cutting factory, as one does...

Dave: Yeah, it happens all the time.

Kim: ...yeah, 23 in Russia. And, that was actually my first management experience was in Russia. I sort of thought business was all about money, a common misperception. And I had to hire these Russian diamond cutters, and I took them for an interview thinking, "I'm going to pay them in dollars, and they're getting paid rubles, which is worthless. This is going to be easy, right?" And they didn't take the job right away, and I realized they wanted to have a picnic. They wanted a picnic, not just the money.

So, I went on the picnic, and we drank a bottle of vodka together. And I realized by the end of the picnic, what they really wanted to know was that someone would give a damn about them. That if everything went to hell in Russia, I would help get them and their families out. And that was the thing I could do that the state couldn't do for them is, I could give a damn.

And I realized, oh, business might be more interesting after all than I thought. And that was kind of the beginning of my business career. So spent a little more time in Russia and then came back and went to business school and worked at the FCC where I was a policy advisor.

Dave: Government too. Wow.



Kim: Yeah. Yeah. I was the only one in my class to go leave Harvard Business School and go to the federal government. But it was a really interesting experience. And then I did three failed startups, and that led to a job at Google as...in tech, you only fall up. You don't fall down, as somebody said.

Dave: Well, I'm sure you had something to do with that, Kim.

Kim: Well, luck had a lot to do with it too. So Google worked out a lot better than those failed startups. And then I went to Apple. I realized the thing that got me up in the morning was not cost per click. That was kind of taking care of itself at Google. The thing that got me up in the morning was building the team and sort of understanding, what are the things you can do to create a great working environment?

Dave: So *Radical Candor* didn't happen right after Google. It was a long windup.

Kim: It was a long windup, yes. There was no job where the day job at Google was thinking about management and teaching managers to manage. But Steve Jobs was starting Apple University at Apple. And a professor of mine from business school had just left Harvard and gone to Apple and persuaded me to go and help develop a class called Managing at Apple. So now all of a sudden, I went from leading this team of 700 people to just leading a team of myself. But it was a great opportunity to sort of take a step back and reflect on what is it that makes a manager great or makes a manager terrible.

Dave: You were training at that point, training others on how to do it. In fact, in your book, you talk about how trainers should be the best at the practice, not the people that can't do it so well, that's one of the things that you talk well about.

Kim: It's crazy how often people who teach management are the people who failed as managers.

Dave: Or never did it.

Kim: Yeah, or never did it at all. In World War II, the U.S. Air Force would take their very best pilots and take them out of combat and bring them back stateside to train the next generation of pilots, whereas, the Germans kept flying them. In the end, it works better to have your best pilots train your new pilots than to fly until they get shot down.

Dave: Well, I really enjoyed *Radical Candor*, and one of the things that struck me is how you take a new look at the Nine-box. I knew there was something I didn't like about the Nine-box, that potential versus performance. I've been on both sides of that discussion being evaluated and being in the room, and there's something permanent about the word potential.

Kim: I think the thing that I didn't like about it is, what person is low potential? There's no such thing as a low potential human being. All people have potential to do something. They may not be growing super-fast in their career, and they may be in a job that they hate, so that also happens.

Dave: Right. They might not be a match for their skills.



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Kim: But it's always felt to me when I had to put someone in the low potential box that there was something almost immoral about that. That felt very wrong. And then the other thing that bothered me about sort of low potential was that it was focused on corporate ladder climbing, which is not inspiring to anybody. Let's face it. I mean, I guess there's some people that get inspired by it.

So, the question is, how can we do a better job thinking about helping people grow in the way they want to grow in their careers? And it was a conversation I had with a leader at Apple actually who said, "Well, on every team, you have people who are in rock star mode and people who are in superstar mode, and you've got to manage them very differently." And I said, "What are you talking about? What's the difference between a rock star and the superstar?"

Dave: They both sound really good.

Kim: And first of all, she said, "No, nobody's permanently a rock star or a superstar. They're people who are in a mode. These are not labels." So people who are in rock star mode are the people who don't right now want your job. They don't want your boss's job. They don't want to be Steve Jobs, but they're great at their job. And if you don't screw it up, they'll keep doing it, often for years. And those are people in rock star mode.

On the other hand, you have people in superstar mode, and sometimes, it's more like shooting star mode. They're not going to be in your orbit very long, but they're doing great work. Those are the people that are on a very steep growth trajectory. And when people are on a very steep growth trajectory, you want to make sure you're giving them new opportunities. You want to make sure that you're carving out a path for promotion for them. And you want to make sure they have a good bench because they're not going to be around that long. They're going to be going onto the next great thing.

On the other hand, when people are in rock star mode, you don't want to be forcing them to get the next promotion. You don't want to be pushing them to invest extra time in their work, and people are in rock star mode for a number of different reasons. Sometimes, you might have something else in your life that is more important than your work, and that's okay as long as you're still doing great work.

Dave: Right, it might just be temporary in some way.

Kim: It might be temporary, or you might be Einstein in the patent office. He didn't get the promotion, but that's not why he was at the patent office. That was his day job. And imagine what would have happened to humanity if somebody said, "You got to put in the extra hours, don't go home and..."

Dave: "We're going to make you manage! A group of a hundred people."

Kim: Yeah. "Don't go home and work on that general relativity crap. You got to climb the next rung on the corporate ladder." It may be somebody just starting a family, somebody has a sick parent, somebody is a writer. T. S. Eliot worked in a bank, and his boss said in this sort of very snotty way, "I see no reason why Eliot might not one day be assistant branch manager." That was not T.S. Eliot's ambition. So people have other stuff in their lives going on. And as long as they're doing great work, let them keep doing it.



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Dave: Well, it seems like that's the root of a lot of your thinking is starting with that individual and working out, right, instead of putting something on them. And I like how you say there doesn't always have to be incredible meaning in your work.

Kim: Paying the rent and putting food on the table, that has real meaning.

Dave: Why do you think *Radical Candor*, your work – and you have colleagues now too in the company – I know this is the book and your company, Radical Candor. Why do you think it's caught on so well?

Kim: Well, you never really know. I wrote three other books that went exactly nowhere. My friend Christa Quarles said that *Radical Candor* is sort of like business poetry, what oft was thought but never so well expressed. So I think it's something that a lot of people have wrestled with like, "I know I should care about the people who I work with, and I know I need to be telling them when they're making mistakes and also when they're doing great work. And I know I need to be giving them guidance. And I know I need to be soliciting guidance from them. I know I'm making mistakes, and I want to hear about them."

But having some words for why we don't do those things, having some words for ruinous empathy, which is what happens when you do show you care, and you're so worried about hurting someone's feelings that you don't tell them something they'd be better off knowing.

Dave: Well, you're starting to... Why don't you do the axis right now and the four quadrants since you're describing it right now. So we'll go into some of the applications.

Kim: So at a very high level, what radical candor, it means, is to care personally and to challenge directly at the same time. Or it's about love and truth, if you want to really abstract up. And so when you care and you challenge at the same time, that's radical candor. When you show you care, but you fail to challenge someone because you don't want to hurt their feelings, for example, that's ruinous empathy. And we all experience that a lot. When you do challenge someone but you forget to show them that you care, that's obnoxious aggression. And we all experience that a lot.

And sometimes, especially when we realize... The hero's journey is you start out being ruinously empathetic, ruinously empathetic. Then you get so mad that you say something obnoxious. So you wind up in obnoxious aggression. And then you feel bad about it, and so instead of moving in the right direction on care personally, you move in the wrong direction on challenge directly. And you wind up in the worst place of all, manipulative insincerity. And this happens at work and at home and in friendships all the time. If you think about movies and books about bosses, they're all horrible people in literature.

Dave: Oh, yeah, they're all tyrants. Right.

Kim: Or something, something not good. And so I think we really need to teach people that you can be a really good human being and be a boss.

Dave: What's the biggest misconception of radical candor in your work, Kim, would you say?



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Kim: The biggest misconception by far unfortunately is people misusing it as an excuse to be a total jerk. So they'll say, "In the spirit of radical candor," and then they'll say something incredibly mean. And that's the spirit of obnoxious aggression, not the spirit of radical candor.

Dave: And one of the things that you talk about I really like is that you say, "Don't attribute it to the person. Talk about the action or the activity that's observed." So when Sheryl Sandberg said you sounded stupid, she didn't say, "You're stupid." So can you talk a little about that theory?

Kim: Yeah, it's so, so important. The purpose of criticism is to help people get better. And so if you criticize somebody's personality attributes, it's not impossible to change your core personality attributes, but it's really hard. And so you want to make sure that you are focusing on specific behaviors or results that somebody can address.

So, telling me, "In the meeting when you said um every third word, it made you sound stupid," I can change my um habit. That's something I can change and address. So I don't believe in fixed personality attributes, but nevertheless, you want to make sure you're focusing on things that people can address.

Dave: The feedback sandwich.

Kim: Yes.

Dave: In fact, the word feedback, you don't use that very much.

Kim: No, I like the word guidance better. I mean, to me, feedback is what happens with a microphone. It's screechy, and it makes you want to your hand...

Dave: Yeah, on stage, right. That's a bad sound. We don't want any more of that. I like that. So you do have some ideas about the feedback sandwich.

Kim: So there's a couple of problems with the feedback sandwich. The big one is that it tends to make people sound insincere. So this is the problem with trying to manage your feedback, if you will, your praise and your criticism by a ratio. You wind up saying, "Gosh, your haircut is fantastic. I really like your haircut. Your podcast sucks, but man, that's a great shirt." Your podcast doesn't suck by the way, but that's the way that the feedback sandwich often sounds. It sounds like, "Kiss me, kick me, kiss me," and it makes it very difficult for most people to hear the positives. All they hear is the negative. Other people only hear the positives, and they'll miss the negative, which is what you're really trying to say. So I think it's much more important to focus on the person and focus on figuring out what's the best way to deliver the message that I really want to deliver to the person in a way that's not going to discourage them.

Dave: Is there something in this topic area, Kim, since you've written the book, and now, you're consulting to organizations, that you've changed your opinion about over the last several years? Maybe it's a lead-in to another book that you have coming up, maybe some new thinking that has evolved with all the consulting that you've done since you wrote the book.



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Kim: Yeah. One of the questions that I get a lot is, what's the difference between radical candor for men and radical candor for women? And I even had one person in a workshop say, "I, as a woman, I'm going to get punished if I use radical candor, so I'm not going to try it." And it was kind of an aggressive stance, but I knew exactly what she meant. And a lot of those comments are what have led in to the next book that I'm currently working on, which is *Radical Courage: Confronting Gender Injustice at Work*.

And one of the things that I realized is, when you're trying to confront something that was said to you, when you're trying to give some feedback, we'll talk first about just to a peer. So let's say somebody says something offensive. You don't know at first whether what they said was a result of unconscious bias, or unconscious prejudice I call it in the new book because I think bias lets us off the hook a little too much. Maybe it was really a prejudiced belief, and maybe the person's just trying to bully you.

And I think very often, the advice on giving feedback assumes good intent. And sometimes, that's a good assumption. And other times, it's a terrible assumption. It assumes that it was an unconscious offense. But sometimes, there's a belief, and other times, the person is using your gender to bully you. And the responses are very different depending on which of those you're confronting. So I think if it's unconscious prejudice, the right response is kind of in an I statement, "I feel like I'm not being taken seriously by you when you call me little girl," or whatever. And that can be effective because you're sort of holding up a mirror to someone, and they realize the impact of what they've said, and they don't really mean it, and they apologize.

But if the person really has a belief, a fundamental belief that women shouldn't work outside the home, for example, then they don't really care how you feel about their belief because it's a belief. And so at the very least, you've got to limit their ability to impose their belief on you. And if you really care about the relationship, you've got to persuade them that this belief is not acceptable for them to impose on you. And that requires, at the very least, an it statement, "It is offensive for me to show up at work and you to think I shouldn't even be here," for example. So you're talking about the it, not how you feel about it, but the it.

And then if somebody is bullying you, you really want to use a you statement. You want to shine a spotlight on their behavior and help them see that there are going to be bad consequences for them of their behavior. It's not going to hurt you. It's going to hurt them because the only thing that changes bullying is consequences. It was my daughter actually who explained this to me because she was kind of getting bullied at school, and I was encouraging her to tell the person how she felt. She's getting madder and madder, and she finally said, "Mom, they're trying to hurt my feelings. If I tell them they hurt my feelings, it's like giving them a cookie." I'm like, "Oh, yes. Of course. Of course."

Dave: It sounds like we have another author and consultant coming.

How did you get the impetus to write this new book?

Kim: I was hearing it in our consulting practice and in the talks and workshops. Both men and women were asking me questions. And I would even get questions on LinkedIn, "I'm a man, and my woman's a boss. What's your advice?" So I was getting a lot of questions for advice about men who are afraid to



give feedback to women, especially in the Me Too era. They're afraid they're going to get in trouble and helping them realize that it's their job as a leader to give feedback.

Dave: So the book's both for men and women.

Kim: Absolutely. The book is, it's organized around things leaders can do, things upstanders can do, things that people who've been harmed by gender injustice can do, and also things that you can do if you realize you're the person causing harm. So there've been several times in my career when I realized that I was not doing the right thing as a leader to prevent women from feeling that it was a hostile work environment. That was a hard thing to realize because I cared about it. But I think a lot of leaders have that experience of, it's something they really care about, and it's hard to see when you maybe contributing to the problem.

Dave: You've told the Sheryl Sandberg story so many times. Maybe you can give us a reader's digest version of it because I don't want you to... I'm sure you're probably sick of telling the story, but I do have one question about that. What does Sheryl think about being the genesis of this whole new radical candor movement? I know she's probably heard by now that you tell the story.

Kim: I asked her that very question. She very kindly had me on a podcast after the book came out, and I said, "I feel kind of sheepish that I'm out there telling this." She's very understanding. She burst out laughing, and she said, "When you write a book, there's always a couple of stories that everybody wants to hear over and over. And part of your job is to tell that story over and over. I get it."

So, here's the um story. It was shortly after I had joined Google, and I had to give a presentation to the CEO and the founders about how the AdSense business was doing. And I walk into the room, and there is Sergey Brin, one of the founders in one corner on an elliptical trainer in toe shoes. And there in the other corner is Eric Schmidt doing his email, and it's like his brain has been plugged into the machine. He's so deep in it. And like any normal person, I felt a little nervous. How in the world was I supposed to get these people's attention? I was supposed to give a presentation. It was like I wasn't even...

Dave: Do you know I'm here, right?

Kim: Yeah, hello? So luckily for me, the AdSense business was on fire. And when I said how many new customers we had added, Eric almost fell out of his chair. He said, "What did you say?" Head pops up out of the computer. So I'm feeling like the meeting's going all right. In fact, I now believe that I'm a genius. And Eric says, "Do you need more engineers? You need more marketing dollars?"

So, as I left the meeting, I pass by Sheryl who was my boss, and I'm expecting a high five or a pat on the back. And instead she says, "Why don't you walk back to my office with me?" And I thought, "Oh, gosh. I've screwed something up, and I'm sure I'm about to hear about it." And Sheryl began, not in the feedback sandwich sense of the word, but seeming to really mean what she said to tell me about some things that had gone well in the meeting.



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But of course, I wanted to know what I had done wrong. And eventually, she said to me, "You said um a lot in there. Were you aware of it?" And I sort of made this brush off gesture with my hand. I'm like, "If that's all I did wrong, who cares?" And I said, "Yeah, I know. It's a verbal tick. It's no big deal." And then she says, "I know a really good speech coach. And I bet Google would pay for it. Do you want an introduction?" And once again, I made this brush off gesture, and I said, "Didn't you hear about all these new customers? I'm too busy for a speech coach." And then she stops, and she looks me right in the eye, and she said, "I can see when you do that thing with your hand, I'm going to have to be a lot more direct with you. When you say um every third word, it makes you sound stupid." Now, she's got my full attention.

And some people would say it was mean of Sheryl to say I sounded stupid, but in fact, it was the kindest thing she could have done for me at that moment in my career. Because if she hadn't used just those words, I wouldn't have gone to see the speech coach. And I wouldn't have learned that I literally said um every third word. Sheryl wasn't exaggerating. And this was news to me because I had raised millions of dollars for two startups giving presentations.

Dave: The feedback loop was really positive.

Kim: I thought I was good at giving presentations. It was almost like I'd been walking through my whole career with my fly down, and nobody had told me. Nobody had had the common courtesy to say, "Hey, Kim, your fly." I could zip it up if I knew. And so it really made me think, what was it about Sheryl that made it so seemingly easy for her to tell me, and why had no one else told me? And eventually thinking about it for another few years actually, I realized it boils down to this care personally, challenge directly business.

Dave: We produce this podcast in cooperation with the local SHRM chapter, NEHRA, and we have a NEHRA Young Professionals question of the podcast that we ask every time. In fact, Meghan Mandino is the new producer of The Hennessy Report here at Keystone, and she's going to slide over here and ask you the NEHRA YP question of the podcast.

Meghan Mandino: What advice would you give young employees who want to build radical candor from the bottom up at their organization if it doesn't already implement it?

Kim: It's a great question, and it's one of my favorite questions. I actually was working with a group of young employees from a very large well known company, and they said they wanted to build it. They said, "This is not a radically candid culture, but we want to build it bottoms up." And they really had some excellent success.

So, I think the important thing is to focus first and foremost on soliciting it. So make sure you understand where you stand with your boss, with your leaders, make sure that you understand their perspective. I think very often... I worked at Google with 700 recent college grads were on my team basically. And one of the things I learned about working with recent college grads is they're very good at giving radical candor actually. They see things very clearly. And they have excellent points.



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But they're not always as good at understanding why things are so screwed up. And they are screwed up. They're correct in identifying that things are not what they ought to be but taking a step back and trying to understand why the problems are happening and also what you might be doing that is contributing to the problem. One of my professors from business school, Richard Tedlow, often recommended to us when we were recent business school grads, he said, "Make sure you know, are you part of the problem or part of the solution?" So you want to ask yourself and the people around you, "Am I part of the problem or part of the solution?" So take time to learn.

And then focus on the good stuff. Focus on the good stuff. It's just as important for you as the employee as it is for your boss to focus on the good stuff. There are things that are going well, and there are things your boss is doing that you appreciate. And if you want your boss to keep doing them, tell your boss, say, "I really like it when you do that. It really helps me," because often, they're not aware, or they think you don't care. And so if you do care, say so.

And then when it comes time to offering criticism, and I know it's scary. It can be very hard speak truth to power, especially if it doesn't seem that the person in power is listening to you. So I think there are a few things that help. One, make sure you go in humbly. You may be wrong, or you may not have the whole picture. I think that's one of the things that young people in their careers don't realize is that they see this one sliver. And when you look at it through the point of view of their one sliver, it seems so obvious and so clear. But when you broaden your frame a little bit, you realize it's a harder problem than you realize. So go in humbly and again, helpfully. You want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. So I hope that helps a little bit.

Dave: A question now thinking about the topic, again it's an HR leader podcast, we have a lot of CHROs that listen and are our guests and Chief People Officers. What kind of steps would you say HR leaders can do to try to bring this kind of thinking and practice, and by the way, is it good for all cultures, radical candor, does the approach fit every culture of an organization that you run across?

Kim: I believe that that love and truth are important in every culture, yes. So at a very high level, absolutely. And I also think that it's just as important for routine work as for sort of super creative knowledge work. It may even be more important for the routine work because people who are doing the routine work know all the thousand little things to do to make it more efficient. So I would encourage you to explore radical candor.

One of the questions that we get very often from HR leaders is how to design a 360 review process in a way that reinforces a culture of radical candor. Because it is very true that a performance review process can help, or it can hurt. So sometimes, when people use the formal performance review process as an excuse not to give developmental feedback, then everything gets worse. So we're coming out with the second edition of *Radical Candor*.

Dave: So there's two books coming.

Kim: There's two books coming, yeah. The second edition is basically *Radical Candor*, but there's a bonus chapter specifically for HR leaders on thinking through what are the things you can do to create a culture



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of radical candor. Because the first part of the book really talks about development. It's really talking about these two minute impromptu conversations. And it's very hard for HR to operationalize two minute impromptu conversations. That's pretty tricky. And I'm not sure you'd want to operationalize them even if you could. It would seem very Big Brother.

One of the things that I did in the second edition is to develop some thoughts around building a performance management system. So if radical candor is mostly about development conversations, how can you build a performance management system that supports those development conversations instead of substitutes for them? I design a whole set of 12 different things to think about in your 360 performance management systems. So I hope that that'll be helpful for HR leaders.

Dave: Well, now we'll end the podcast with just some short questions. Is that okay?

Kim: That's great.

Dave: All right. If you can write a letter of career advice to your 30-year-old self, Kim, what would you write in that letter?

Kim: The top advice is don't forget to quit.

Dave: Don't forget to quit.

Kim: Don't forget to quit. I think a lot of people feel stuck for too long in jobs. When you're in a job with a manager who is making you miserable, it's an awful experience. In fact, I once had a boss who was so belittling to me that I shrunk, and I'm only five feet tall. My doctor couldn't believe it, but she said, "You've shrunk. You're too young to be shrinking. You're only 30." And now, it might not be so surprising that I'm an old lady, but then I was too young to shrink. So I think I stuck with that job too long. You do have other options.

Dave: Know when it's time to go. Yup.

Kim: Yeah. Don't stick around when something's making you that miserable, and I see people do this all the time. I see people develop insomnia. They break out in hives. There are other jobs for you out there.

Dave: That's good advice. A book that changed your life, Kim.

Kim: *Middlemarch*, George Eliot. Novels really are the books that I love to read. And George Eliot, she wrote... *Middlemarch* is a beautiful book. She also wrote a book called *Romola*, which is all about ruinous empathy and how ruinous empathy becomes manipulative insincerity over time. She didn't call it that. But I think the novels for me have been such an important way to build empathy and to understand human behavior, even more important than reading psychology, which I do a lot of. But read the great novels.



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Dave: The great novels, all right. One last question for you, if you could bring any person back from history, who would it be and why?

Kim: I would love to go have a bottle of white wine with Virginia Woolf. She is one of my heroes. She wrote this wonderful essay called *The Angel in the House*. The essay refers to this Victorian poem about how women are so wonderful because they have no wants or needs of their own. They just exist to serve the men around them. And Virginia Woolf said, "It is the role of the woman writer to kill the angel in the house." And this unfortunately is unfinished business because she's left the house and entered the office. And I think there's an awful lot of women who burn themselves out trying to be the angel in the office. So I'd love to get her words of wisdom on killing the angel in the office as well as the angel in the house.

Dave: Well, Kim, it's been so great having you on the podcast. Thank you so much.

Kim: Thank you. Really fun conversation.

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