How to Be a Data Leader

Community Roundtable

Data Leadership Collaborative

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How to Be a Data Leader

Companies want to be more progressive in their approach to data and analytics. As a data leader, what can you do to work together with frontline employees, management, and C-suite members to transform your organization? In this roundtable, three data leaders from three different continents share their perspectives.

Panelists

Laura Madsen
CEO, Moxy Analytics,
Lakeville, Minnesota, U.S.

Abisola Oni
Data Product Owner, Paystack,
Lagos, Nigeria

David Pires
Director, Analytics Products
& Visualisation Engineering,
Expedia Group,
London, England

01.

What Is the Path to Data Leadership?

Data Leadership Collaborative (DLC): How did you get started in analytics and data? What was your path?

Abisola Oni: I pretty much stumbled into it. I studied electrical engineering for undergrad, and after a year, I took the year off from learning how to be an engineer to work at a power plant. I had done that for a year, and I just felt like it wasn't for me. My classmates said they were hiring at this company, and in the interview I was supposed to prepare a deck about Tableau. This was December 2016. They were looking for someone who would lead their analytics practice, because they were a Tableau partner in Nigeria. I guess I was able to convince them that I knew what I was doing, so I got the job. But you can't pitch and sell Tableau unless you know how to use the software and understand it. Over time, I also developed interest in data outside of just selling it to organizations. I wanted to build my own dashboards that help organizations see and understand it. Then I moved from a sales commercial role to a business analytics data role over the past few years. And of course I learned everything on the internet, so here's a shout-out to the internet, and Tableau forums, and YouTube.

David Pires: The way I got started was a little bit of a fluke. I used to work in banking for a number of years. I thought I wanted to potentially become a mortgage broker and focus on some of that area, so I completed the requirements to do the exams to become a mortgage broker in 2008. That was probably the worst time to become a mortgage broker, because the financial crash had just happened. So I found myself in January 2009 thinking about what I was going to do next, and I found a role that needed some market analysis focusing on banking, which I had some experience in. I found a good mentor in that role, and that catapulted my opportunities in terms of learning more about analytics. And then I worked my way there in

a number of companies. I moved to consulting and worked in BI. I helped organizations make use of their data, and that let me go back to the client side and focus on data engineering. Today I work with a combined group of engineers, software developers, and visualization engineers at Expedia. So it's been kind of a very fortuitous career so far.

Laura Madsen: I actually have an educational background in analytics. I have a master's degree in applied psychology, which is essentially a social science degree, where we learned how to control error with statistical methods. And that was back when you'd actually use DOS. That's probably a different webinar about the things they used to do back in the late '90s and early 2000s to bang the data together. But in the subsequent 23 years, I've spent most of that time really being a leader in organizations, building data and analytics and data warehouse functions, and then part of my career as a consultant, helping other organizations do that.

DLC: Your responses sound typical of the first-generation data leaders we speak to: "I was in banking. I was a pianist. I was an accountant. I was an engineer." Real degree programs for data leadership are still few and far between. There are more two-day seminars, or maybe a six-week course at a business school. So it feels like a really interesting time to be in a position like all of you hold.

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– David Pires
Director, Analytics Products & Visualisation Engineering, Expedia Group

02.

What Does It Mean to Be a Data Leader?

DLC: Given your varied backgrounds, can you talk a little bit about what it means for you to be a data leader today, and what qualities of your training but also your practical experience are most important to your success?

Laura Madsen: For the first ten years of my career, I used my education every day. I was thinking about how you managed data, how you used data, and then statistical applications of that data. Since I've gotten into leadership and management, I actually don't do that part, because I'm trying to mentor and bring folks with me. So honestly, it's probably more my communication skills that I use every day. You have to be able to make the case, not only for the data itself, but also for your team.

Abisola Oni: As Laura said, it's heavy on communication, because you are dealing with multiple stakeholders across different teams. Most times, data is seen as a service partner, so you're supporting different product teams, expansion teams like customer service, so you're literally in the middle of all this chaos. Prioritization is also important- what is important for the company, and then for your team? That way you are able to deliver on what is going to have the maximum impact at this point in time. Even though you have long-term goals, what is going to deliver value now? That doesn't mean you should forget your long-term goals, of course, but you just need to prioritize.

David Pires: I would second both Laura and Abi in terms of those areas around mentorship. I like to foster a culture of curiosity in critical thinking. We have large amounts of data today, and it's very easy to just get data, look at what it's telling us, and go with that. But a lot of the time a data leader ends up acting almost like a translator and being the connector between what teams are building from an analysis perspective and what the strategy of the business needs. So you end up asking a lot of the hard questions, making sure that we can translate where the business needs to go in terms of the requests for the data and what we're trying to achieve with it.

DLC: So data leadership is equal parts mentor, communicator, translator, and prioritizer, but also someone who turns a critical eye on data where others might not.

David Pires: Yes. It's building a culture where we're happy to question what the data is saying, rather than just taking everything at face value. We should foster skills within our teams, as well as with our stakeholders and business partners.

DLC: This is a good segue to throw out a question. As a data leader, how do you deal with communicating to organizations, leadership, or a workforce where there may be a very low level of data literacy?

David Pires: I think the easiest way is just to take small steps. If we think about our lives, most of the changes we are happy to accept are small initially, even if they lead to a bigger result. Ultimately, our work lives revolve around relationships and trust, so a lot of what we have to do is gain the trust from the other side, either through the business or our stakeholders, and the way that we're trying to deliver our strategy.

So if there's an initiative that is coming up and you see value in it, maybe that's where you start. You start delivering the first phase, and once people see the value of that, you do the second phase and then the third one. Once you've done that a number of times, you start getting all your partners to act as an extension of you, and they do the evangelizing for you.

Abisola Oni: I think what David is saying is correct. Most times, people already have a flow of how they work, so when there's this thing that's new, it's difficult for you to move out of that flow you're in to accommodate it. So it's little steps, helping people in the best way to make sure they don't move out of their flow, but even if they do, to ask, "Okay, how does this process help you get better at this decision you're trying to make? If you compare your existing solution with this new thing I'm proposing, how does it help you?" And if they've seen that it works, you have one foot in.

DLC: Before we move off this topic, one question for Laura. Can you address your "translator" role when it comes to data governance? There is a lot of technical detail in governance, and that often doesn't translate in terms of the significant value it delivers to organizations.

Laura Madsen: Yeah, that's interesting. I often work with organizations that have been doing data governance and just can't seem to find that traction. And it really does come down to how do you explain value in something that is relatively obscure and/or arcane? Because if you're not finding a way to deliver value, then you're not doing your job. To be that translator, you have to have solid understanding and solid relationships in your organization to understand what that value could be. You also have to democratize the data, which means you need to have a high tolerance for people doing things with it you never anticipated.

DLC: And that can be particularly problematic when you have a data scientist team off grinding on something but the business leaders really don't have any idea what they're doing, and the fact that they're not creating value, because they may not have strong data literacy.

Laura Madsen: Data literacy is a slippery slope in my mind, both in relation to how people perceive themselves and in how you perceive them. There is an attitude where it's easy to say, "They just don't understand." Well, why should they? Back to Abi's point earlier: They have their own job, they're in their own flow, and so it's on you as a data leader to work harder as that translator to understand contextually what's driving a lot of the reason why they don't understand. That's not on them.

03.

How Do You Build Data Culture?

DLC: Let's move on to data leadership and culture and what the role of a data leader should be there. Has anyone seen success in making the experience of learning about data more personal, even fun? Can you talk about ways that you've been able to encourage collaboration?

Abisola Oni: I'm quite fortunate to work in an organization where it's not really a struggle to get people to use data. What we've realized is that we would need to help people find the information by themselves. Let's say we need to calculate the total transaction value for last month since Paystack enables online and offline payments. If they know that they can go to this particular table, and if that table is documented properly so all the fields are documented, they can help themselves.

We've also had people willingly ask us, "Oh, I need training in this particular thing." Or, "Can you show me how to do this?" So we just launched a data learning series describing how data flows from our production systems to our data warehouse, right down to our visualization layer but reducing all the technical jargon. We added quizzes at the end of each video, and then we collaborated with our design team to create really fun badges, where if you finish a particular model, you get this kind of badge, and so on. We also didn't make it a blanket requirement to take the course, but made it a bit more targeted based on behavior and usage.

DLC

DLC: What about creating a culture where you can safely allow users to dive in and play with data without a significant impact on governance?

Laura Madsen: I love the idea of sandboxing data, having sets of data that are blessed. We used to call them sandboxes. And maybe there's a level of education that has to happen before you let them in so you're not necessarily certifying the data, but you're certifying the individual. But the cultural challenge with governance is that the balance has been entirely too heavy on the "lock this down, prevent everybody from doing anything" side. When you do that, people actually go around you and do things you never anticipated. They create shadow IT functions. They're buying products that have their own tools and warehouses attached to them.

So I firmly believe one of the better things that you can do, as long as you're doing this within the context of following rules around information security and privacy, is to let people play with data and see what happens. And every organization is going to have a different degree of willingness to manage that. But the reality is that if you're getting eyeballs on the data, you get feedback, and then you can take in that feedback, and it will only improve your data quality because people are telling you things that you couldn't possibly anticipate. There is really no value in data without context, accuracy, uniqueness, and completeness, and the more feedback you get, the faster you can change those things on the back end. So if you want to use an analogy of an engine, people using data — That's the fuel that you need.

DLC: How about the role of champions who publicly celebrate and promote your work? Have you benefited from colleagues who get behind what you're doing as a data leader? And do those people tend to be more from the business side or the technical side?

David Pires: To me the idea of champions needs to be a two-way street. I'm a champion and stakeholder for teams that run platforms, and they're a champion for me and the work that our teams do with data. The technical leaders want us to use their technology because it's going to bring value to the business, and I want them to be there providing the right technology for me to be able to add value to the business.

The same thing happens with the business side, because data ultimately is a team sport. I can't deliver everything on my own, so it needs to be a partnership with the business teams to make sure that they are getting what they need, make sure they are providing what they want in terms of requirements and things like that, so that we can do the best to inform them and to help the business. That's how I usually see champions. We need to work together toward one common goal.

Continuing to enable your people to do their best work and creating an environment for them to thrive is what you do as a data leader. If they're able to see the impact and the value of the work they're doing, that's something that money cannot really buy.

– Abisola Oni
Data Product Owner, Paystack

DLC

04.

How Can Data Leaders Increase Employee Retention?

DLC: Let's hear your opinions about the data leader's role in finding and retaining talent. What have you or your clients been doing there?

Laura Madsen: My clients struggle with that. And to be honest with you, sometimes companies want to throw money at the problem and have a consultant come in and fix it. The reality is, I can't fix that. That's a deeply embedded cultural thing. You either go outside of your organization for leadership or you build it within the organization. When I was a leader in organizations, I felt like it was very much my job to train my replacement and to build up and create a solid foundation for data leadership, whatever that looked like.

Abisola Oni: Especially here in Nigeria, over the last two to three years getting into data has become a really big thing. There are boot camps and courses focused on upskilling SQL, Tableau, Power BI — all these things. So it's a general problem in terms of retaining talent. But I feel like continuing to enable your people to do their best work and creating an environment for them to thrive in is what you do as a data leader. For most people, it's not always about money. If they're able to see the impact and the value of the work they're doing, that's something that money cannot really buy. Also, there are probably data people who want to do experiments, so how can you support those kinds of things? How can the organization support it, even though there are pressing immediate problems? Is there a long-term plan for those kinds of things to happen?

David Pires: I was just thinking about the London market, and I think we've seen a number of those situations, in terms of acceleration of hiring, where maybe not everyone has the right skills because they've done a lot of job hopping. I think time in a role gives you a lot of skills, because you get a lot of experience around the industry, what it looks like, and what the competitors look like, and then that experience propels you into different roles. Leaders have the duty to be creating those opportunities for others, but also to convey that you need to have been in an organization through the good and the bad times. And by that I mean solving problems or confronting situations you've never faced before. I think retention is stronger when you create the opportunities to learn.

DLC: To what extent does defining everyone in the organization as a data leader help to retain talent? This is overstating for effect, but if data will be part of everyone's job flow in the future, if it isn't already, shouldn't we all be data leaders?

Laura Madsen: I feel like when we talk about those examples — quality is everyone's job, sales is everyone's job, data is everyone's job — it has a primary intent, which is that this is so ubiquitous and important to the function of our organization that you really should take some accountability. But the secondary impact can be a dynamic where all of a sudden nobody really has direct accountability to lead, or build, or grow the effort.

To avoid that slippery slope, I've said that everyone is a data steward. I don't mean when organizations put data stewardship on someone who is already insanely busy and gives them almost no time or compensation to actually do the job. I'm talking about it in the context of iterative, small, micro projects. Everyone's a data steward for the 15 minutes that they're looking at their dashboard. If they see something wrong, then they say something. So maybe this concept of everyone being a data leader is that everyone's a data leader at some point throughout their day, but it's not their job, it's not their full-time accountability.

David Pires: I completely agree, though I wouldn't say that everyone is a data steward. I think everyone needs to be able to use data for as far as the role requires it, and different people have different needs. If you're trying to define metrics, you should have a data steward and a business owner who can come together to say, "Here's how we measure metric A." And that should be a way of defining the way that we measure and build confidence in that metric. If someone doesn't have data literacy skills yet and we're asking them to make decisions on something that they don't have a grasp on, I don't think that leads to success. So it's a case of tapping the right people as data stewards.

05.
What Is the Future of Data Leadership?

DLC: Let's wind up with a question about the next generation of data leaders. How do you think they're going to look different from the data leaders of today?

Abisola Oni: There will be more to learn, that's for sure, but as new technology becomes available, the next data leaders will have to answer some questions. How can we get to solutions faster? How can we make our infrastructure more scalable? How can we prepare for working at scale? There are a lot of titles within the data space, too, so maybe there'll be a merging of titles or roles. Or it'll continue to be more differentiated.

David Pires: I really hope data leadership achieves the same level of importance that we attribute to our financial offices and our IT areas. Because there's no denying that data will only become more prevalent. With that prevalence, it'll become harder to decide which data we should be using. We can't be using all the data all the time, so I think making sure that data leaders of the next generation have a seat at the table and are able to drive the strategy for the business is critical. I don't think data leaders of the future will succeed if they are stuck in organizations reporting to a CFO or reporting to a marketing director.

Laura Madsen: Yeah, I agree. I think that as the data gets bigger, the tools get easier to use, that allows us to welcome lots of different thinking about how to lead with data. I think there's going to be a lot of consolidation in terms of the capabilities and the roles, because the tools will make that part a lot easier.

It's also my distinct hope that leaders in the data space, at that chief data officer level, are very diverse and very "female forward." The reality is, the industry is very much reflective of that but that leadership layer is not. I think we can influence much more of that by reflecting our organizations better, which in turn makes it easier to communicate the value throughout the organization. So we have to give those leaders a place at the table so that they can really lead your organization with data.

DLC: That's a great note to close on, embracing the vision of data leaders who are more diverse, more reflective of their organizations, more empowered by technologies that make their jobs easier, and leading departments that acknowledge data is just as important as financial information, and knowing those skills are just as vital to creating and measuring success. Thank you all for a great conversation.

It's my distinct hope that leaders in the data space, at that chief data officer level, are very diverse and very 'female forward.' The reality is, the industry is very much reflective of that but that leadership layer is not.

– Laura Madsen
CEO, Moxy Analytics

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