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Designing Data Governance from the Ground Up

Six Steps to Build a Data-Driven Culture

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Six Steps to Build a Data-Driven Culture

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In October 2021, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a plan to tackle climate change. Clocking in at 40 pages, the agency's climate adaptation and resilience plan explains how the agency will help agricultural producers build resilience for an increasingly erratic climate.

In its press release announcing this plan, USDA said, "The plan is part of USDA's response to Executive Order 14008, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, which tasked all federal agencies with preparing action plans for integrating climate adaptation into their missions, programs, operations, and management."

As I learned how this new plan will affect the agency, I was struck by the Executive Order's decree for all agencies to integrate climate adaptation into their DNA. Since I was in the thick of data governance research, I couldn't help but notice how this new plan might serve as a model for great data governance.

First, this plan addressed the President's Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad. The U.S. President declared climate change to be a widespread problem that the government should tackle from the top down across all USDA agencies. To ensure that this goal remained top-of-mind, leadership tasked all agencies with making climate adaptation a key part of their work.

While climate change itself might not have much to do with data, USDA's governance model does. Their approach emphasizes how crucial it is to have top-down support for an initiative that scales across teams. It's worth highlighting since this way of working is still not the norm.

Typically, when companies start new initiatives, they put all the work for that initiative on one team or department. They hire a new chief, task them with transforming the whole business while wielding minimal power, often give that chief an underwhelming budget, and keep their initiatives confined to that team. Approaching digital transformations this way ensures that their work will have minimal impact.

This chapter will show you how to do the opposite. You will learn how to form a cross-functional data stewardship council that drives real change in your organization. At the end of this chapter, you'll know why the right sponsor makes or breaks your council, when your newly formed council should meet, and which data efforts to prioritize first. You will have a way to resolve road-blocks, measure success, and govern data on the way to production.

Remember, the biggest barriers to building data governance aren't technical, they're cultural. Ninety-two percent of mainstream companies in one survey

said that when it comes to launching data projects in their organizations, they still struggle with challenges that range from learning new business processes to resistance against change.¹ You are designing your organization's first data governance plan, which means you're introducing a lot of change. Here's how to create a council that will champion this change.

Find the Most Effective Sponsor

We've all dealt with meeting fatigue where colleagues try to solve problems by filling our calendar with invitations to "hop on a quick call." If meetings lack purpose, agendas, clear leaders, or follow-up actions, they could've been emails and saved endless hours. One less-discussed time suck? Not having the right people in the room to make key decisions.

You've done lots of work thus far to select the right data stewards for your data governance council. All of it will stall if you don't have a senior member of your organization to sponsor this council and its data governance efforts. So, your first step is to confirm whom you'll need sponsorship from.

Imagine you're in a C-suite role yourself as the Chief Data Officer (CDO). You might report to the Chief Information Officer (CIO) or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Your role involves writing the strategy to collect, store, and manage your organization's data. All of this work is data governance, and since you're part of the executive team, you might be the perfect person to lead the data governance council by serving the board chair stewardship role that we'll discuss below.

If you're in a C-suite role yourself, do you need more executive buy-in? The answer depends on your unique business, the company culture, and your own relationship with the rest of the executives. If you report to the CIO, your boss owns the infrastructure for your organization. Their tasks include signing off on procurement for new tech, implementing new IT across the organization, and ensuring that all IT decisions support the business strategy.

Now, consider the work your data governance council will do. You'll start by selecting a specific, data-focused project to shepherd through production. To achieve this goal, your data stewards will need to choose the right tech stack, build processes to confirm data quality, ensure that all data meets security standards, and document a strategy to prevent data drift post-production, amongst other tasks.

1. <https://hbr.org/2021/02/why-is-it-so-hard-to-become-a-data-driven-company>

Since this work falls under the CIO's domain, your data governance council will need the CIO's buy-in. But you've glimpsed your boss's calendar and know how slammed they are. Adding council chairperson duties to their list won't likely go well. In this case, asking them to serve as your council's sponsor is a great option.

Sponsors are discussed less often than mentors, but their role is more essential. Sponsors advocate for your work by ensuring that it gets the resources and visibility to thrive. This saves huge amounts of time in the long run. Rather than spending months searching for buy-in only to realize you've recruited the wrong people, you'll confirm that your data governance council's work has support from someone with the power and connections to advocate for that work, even when your councilmembers are not in the room.

Whoever your council sponsor is, you will need to sell them on your data governance efforts. Remember the data mission statement that you wrote in Chapter 1? It's going to come in handy here. Since you'll be appealing to business leaders, you'll need to show that your data governance efforts support their goals. All the work you did in Chapter 1, from writing your mission statement for data to assigning stewards per section of your framework, should reinforce a bigger business goal. Whatever that goal is, from decreasing overhead to boosting customer satisfaction, you'll find the right sponsor for your data governance council if you show that your work will improve theirs.

If you're not sure how to choose the right sponsor for your council, it helps to follow this guidance from Sylvia Ann Hewlett: "Would-be sponsors in large organizations are ideally two levels above you with line of sight to your role; in smaller firms, they're either the founder or president or are part of his or her inner circle."²

As you read this advice, consider your own organizational structure. Whether you're in the C-suite or below, finding the right sponsor for your council will require you to manage up. The best way to do that is to find senior leaders in your organization who grasp how crucial data is for your business, are familiar with your work, and have strong relationships with colleagues across the business. Most crucially, they're committed to giving your council the buy-in, resources, and sponsorship to succeed. Their help is essential to not letting your work languish.

2. <https://hbr.org/2013/09/the-right-way-to-find-a-career-sponsor>

Convince Colleagues to Join Your Council

Remote work's rise during the Covid-19 pandemic further blurred the thin line between work and home. Six months into the pandemic, Harvard Business School research found that the average workday was now 48.5 minutes longer.³ The average employee surveyed in this study joined 13 percent more meetings than they did pre-pandemic. I know that these constant check-ins, scrum standups, and Slack pings distract me like nothing else. I'm doing my best to join fewer meetings, not more.

This matters because employees are exhausted, including your colleagues. Between work and family obligations, their calendars are likely overbooked already. When colleagues already struggle to do heads-down work during business hours, you'll need to show them what they'll gain by joining the council. Luckily, this doesn't have to be as hard as you might think.

To start, don't underestimate the fear of missing out (FOMO). It's why we attend all these meetings to start with.⁴ In an increasingly globalized workforce, Western work culture still equates presence with productivity. People worry that if they decline meetings invites, they will lose their abilities to influence the business.

This is not an excuse to triple book your colleagues with data governance meetings. That said, the psychological importance placed on meetings means that folks want their voices heard, especially when it affects their own work.

That raises my second point: data is a team sport that all colleagues must join. I recall completing my journalism internships in high school and college, giddy at the thought of not needing to measure my work's worth in numbers. Less than a decade later, my digital articles lived and died by Google Analytics. No matter your role, data plays a part, even if your work is more qualitative. But to quote Maximilian Faschan, formerly of the Oxford Internet Institute, not everyone has equal say over data's impact on their work:⁵

“In the current reality, data exploration is in the hands of a small group of specialists crunching data on everybody else's behalf while most employees have to watch from the side-line until their analytical demands are being served. In this largely transactional setup, the confidence with which employees rely on data, the speed with which analytical requests are executed and the number of analytical requests that can be served at any given point in time are strictly dependent on the number of specialists available.”

3. <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/you-re-right-you-are-working-longer-and-attending-more-meetings>
4. <https://hbr.org/2021/11/the-psychology-behind-meeting-overload>
5. <https://towardsdatascience.com/what-if-data-became-everybodys-business-85b7c20d6ab7>

The traditional hierarchy involves data flowing down from the CIO's office, with the IT security team controlling all departments' access to it. This approach often fails because folks are less open to rules thrust upon them, especially if they had no say in creating them and can't see how these rules improve their own work. So, when you approach prospective data stewards to join your council, emphasize the power that joining offers them. Each data steward serving on the council should have these things:

- Recognition that they're experts of their functional domains. If colleagues have questions about specific types of data, they should know whom to ask and acknowledge each steward's unique expertise.
- Input regarding decisions about data that affect the organization. Each steward should also have clearly defined freedom to work with the council's chair on matters that impact their own data domains.
- Autonomy to build data quality standards within their data domains
- Freedom to collaborate cross-functionally with colleagues who own different data domains
- Rewards for assuming a leadership role advancing data governance in the organization

If you manage a budget, consider allotting some of it to bonuses per steward. Likewise, find alignment between each steward's role and their work on the council. If their data governance contributions go beyond each steward's scope of work, you can offer to write mid-year and/or year-end reviews per steward. This formally recognizes the work each steward does and positions them to advance in their careers. For instance, if a steward who holds a business role wants to pursue a data-based role full time, your review of their stewardship work can speed up their transition.

The common threads are leadership, visibility, and the autonomy to do impactful work. The point is not to make these data governance council meetings the only place where stewards are seen and heard. Rather, your goal as council chair is to give each data steward the resources they need to own data each day, throughout their data domains' life cycles.

Clarify the Cadence for Your Council Meetings

I once pitched a data governance council as part of my team's data strategy proposal. During the first meeting with our client, we shared why a council of cross-functional data stewards is the best way to manage data standards and lead agency-wide adoption of those standards. Upon sharing our pitch,

my team was thrilled to hear our client say that they agreed with our approach. Still, they had a few questions about the execution: how much time would stewards spend on this work, and how could we ensure that they'd make meaningful contributions while taking care not to burn out?

I think this question should be top-of-mind as you build your own data governance council. My client asked these questions because they needed to sell data governance—and a council to lead it—across their agency. Although my client held a C-suite data role, they didn't manage the business writ large. They needed to lead without direct authority. And, knowing their colleagues as they did, my client had to share the time commitment that stewards could expect.

I bet you've faced this challenge as well. Maybe you're a CIO who must persuade all colleagues to use company technology in appropriate ways. Perhaps you're a junior consultant who must persuade your client why tech adoption sans strategy won't work in the long run. No matter your role, you will need to lead without authority at some point. To do this well, you must design solutions that answer your colleague's key problems.

When convincing data stewards to join your data governance council, lack of time is likely a big blocker. If colleagues decline to serve stewardship roles, it's often because they don't believe it's worth their time or they think they don't have time. You must account for this in your pitch to prospective stewards. You'll succeed if you are honest about the time commitment and share how joining the council will improve their current roles.

When building your council from the ground up, it's ideal to meet at least every other week. The lion's share of policy, process, and procedural work occurs in this early stage, and you'll need commitment from all stewards involved. This work sets the stage for all data governance efforts from now on.

Let's say your data team wants to migrate datasets from an on-premise environment into a cloud-based environment next year. They will need a set of standards they can follow to uphold data quality, privacy, and integrity. For instance, if your data engineers find a dataset that has metadata with personally identifiable information, they'll need to know how they should handle that problem. While they can complete this migration without such standards (most teams do), this increases the risk that your data will be subpar.

All stewards serving on your data governance council must view this work as an investment in the business and their roles within it. Once your council lays the first foundation, it pays dividends by giving all colleagues a clear set of standards to use for their benefit. Until then, ensure that your council

gives this work the time it deserves. That should involve meeting for at least 60 minutes every other week. Between meetings, stewards should expect to contribute one to four hours of work towards achieving the key tasks covered throughout this chapter.

When sharing this news, recall that you've selected data stewards because their roles align with the work required to make key decisions about data in their domains. While serving on the council requires commitment, this work should align with stewards' current tasks and goals. If your senior marketing director will serve as a steward leading the collaboration and culture aspect of your data framework, this fits into their work attracting the right user base for your organization's products. Each steward's job exists to grow and improve your organization. Since strong data governance achieves that goal, each steward's manager should adjust stewards' workloads to prioritize this.

See why council sponsors are so crucial? To give this council the time and resources it needs to thrive, you'll need governance to be a top-down effort. Data stewards and their bosses won't support the data governance council without knowing it's approved and prioritized by senior leadership. If you prioritize sponsorship buy-in, ensure that each steward is the right fit to lead aspects of the data framework, and share how stewards' council work enhances their own, you can design a response that addresses the time crunch.