

No Authority? Here's How Data Professionals Still Lead

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SUMMARY

The discussion emphasizes the importance of data professionals not only executing tasks but also actively contributing to business growth by challenging existing practices and proposing data-driven initiatives. Both speakers highlight the need for effective communication and relationship-building within organizations to foster collaboration and drive value.

- Data professionals should not just fulfill requests but also add value by challenging assumptions and suggesting improvements.*
- It's crucial for data roles to align with business objectives and contribute to the organization's success.*
- Effective communication and relationship-building are essential for influencing decision-makers and gaining buy-in for new ideas.*
- Professionals must balance their immediate job responsibilities with proactive engagement in business initiatives.*
- Recognizing when an organization limits personal growth is important; sometimes, seeking opportunities elsewhere may be necessary.*
- Continuous learning and side projects can help professionals grow, even in restrictive environments.*
- Building credibility and demonstrating execution capability is vital for gaining support for larger initiatives.*
- Ultimately, data professionals should aim for roles that allow them to influence business direction and drive meaningful change.*

which in that case to me is a complete failure in your job. Many data professionals actually the way they operate is people come to them and say hey can we build this report or can you build this metric and they just do whatever they're being asked without actually thinking and without adding any value along the way. These people will be replaced by you know judge before we know it. If you don't add value, if you don't ask questions, if you don't give any any valuable input, and you're not challenging the business and the product to do better using your data, and you're not pushing the boundaries of what's possible, then I would seriously question whether you're the right person for the job. Hi everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today. Today I've got uh in the studio Akosh Moy Akosh and I've been connected for a long time and he recently reached out following one of the posts I made about how data leaders and data professionals need to lead and he had some feedbacks and questions about that and I just thought it's a good conversation. It's a good discussion that others can benefit from as well. So I just thought that it will be nice for both of us to just have a chat have it recorded and uploaded. Um so Akosh why don't you just start by very quickly introducing yourself and then what was your question or feedback and we can start the conversation there.

>> Yeah thank you and thank you Shahar for having me on this conversation. I think that these are really really exciting topics. So yeah briefly about me. I'm an engineering leader for decades now. I'm based in Sudic, Switzerland and uh yeah I told you a lot about engineering leadership and growth and personal growth and team dynamic topics and this is why this topic caught my eye a little bit. So what it was about basically is that Shafar you posted actually a couple of times along the lines that when you're coaching people about career progression and how they should grow and move forward, do you recommend that they figure out how what they do, how it fits into the organization's business, does it generate revenue, like how is it tied to the core business of the organization?

And you also recommend them that that you know they should basically come up with initiatives that ties into this vision and basically instead of trying to sell kind of technical solutions why don't they drive business initiatives and my observation is yes of course everybody should be aware of how their contribution directly drives the business that they are in but at the same time I believe that in a lot of roles and a lot of levels within a a multi-level organization It's not the best advice to to tell people that they should just drive their own business initiatives within the or to move forward. And my observation in this case is that usually there are people dedicated in the organization who are driving the business direction. And if you just you know out of your own initiative try to come up with new business directions and opportunities or even engage with clients and and try to talk to them to see what where the value would be generated for them and so forth then the people who are actually driving this in the or you would have a hard time collaborating with them. And this is kind of my immediate butt uh to this initiative on like how to balance understanding and driving new business initiatives forward but not to step on the toes of those high level decision makers who are basically appointed by the organization to drive this.

>> So first of all I appreciate you bringing this up and I think that I I did get a lot of I I made several posts to that effect and I still stand behind it. uh explain why but I do feel like this is a topic that some people find very controversial. So I appreciate you stepping in and asking the question and bringing up this discussion. Um I'll ask you first um if we think about this uh you know magic quadrant right where you have two dimensions one of them is let's say how good your data or technology is right and the other one is how successful your business is. Let's say that you have state-of-the-art technology, you know, the best-in-class data platform, but your business is failing. Is that success?

>> Of course not. >> Yeah. So, I think that's the the first thing we need to establish, right? And a lot of data teams and a lot of data professionals, what they think is I'm just going to build a data platform. I'm just going to build a prediction model, whatever, you know, I'm just going to do whatever analysis people ask me to do. But it's not actually resulting in any materializ material change to the business which in that case to me is a complete failure in your job. Okay. Now if we think of levels that matter just as a reference right level three level four level five is like early career I would say at level three four if you only do what people ask you to do and you don't bear any like responsibility for the business maybe that's okay.

Maybe um but you know at some point there has to be a point where it's expected that whatever you do contributes to the business and adds value to the business and that you're pushing the business forward, the

company forward, the product forward, helping make the company better. Okay, that's that's number one. The second question that I think it was actually Vishagashi who was my VP of data engineering at Meta like we had a similar conversation at some point in the past and he he asked me he said Jahar let's say you go to a country you've never been to before somewhere in Africa right let's say you go to Zimbabwe and you land in the airport you take a taxi driver and you ask them to take you to to a nearest city and you sit in the back seat and you've got your Google Maps open and you actually see that they're taking you the long way around or you see that wherever they're going there's uh blockage in the road or there's too much traffic. What do you do in that case? Do you just sit quietly and let them drive because they're they're the driver or do you ask the question and do you challenge their approach?

And I think it's really important because a lot of people I I think has this misconception that the fact that somebody else is driving right now and the fact that somebody else has that job doesn't mean that you cannot ask the question doesn't mean that you cannot challenge. It doesn't mean that you cannot offer alternatives or say hey listen like I I think that this road might be blocked or I think there's too much traffic or I think there might be a shorter way so let's take the shorter way. I think that you're allowed to do that. Will people get upset about that?

Sometimes yes, possibly. Some people might get upset. I don't think that people getting upset or stepping on people toes means that you shouldn't be doing these things. I mean, I think that in the end of the day, people get rewarded for doing what's right for the company. >> Yeah, I'm I'm going to play a little bit of the devil's advocate, right? Because especially because we're talking about career advancement in organizations and also reasonably sized organizations. So in a lot of cases in these organizations there is a hierarchy already established there is a agendas for everyone and uh also they are the ones who are either going to support you moving upwards or not. So what I what I hear you saying generally yes but I also feel it's a little bit idealistic when you look at these cases in reality a lot of times people want their reports to deliver on their needs. I'm not saying this is good or not. I'm just saying that this is how it is in a lot of cases is that you know if somebody has teams reporting to them they pretty much want those teams to deliver on the you know whatever goals were set at quarterly half a year or whatever and a lot of times that's the kind of only expectation and if you want to advance in such a situation then you know saying that yeah I could do that but I don't think that's a good idea and I'd rather do something else is not something that might sit very well.

So, so I think that it's important to realize the situations where identifying new opportunities at uh you know which are way outside of the scope of your original mandate is good but also there's opportunities where this is uh you know in the in the best case neutral in the worst case it can actually backfire. >> You're right. Right. So a few things on that, right? First of all, we need to distinguish between what you do and how you do it, right? You also need to execute well on that. So you need to make sure that first of all, you're not failing at your day job. And if you're, let's say, a data engineer, but you spend all your time, you know, talking to marketing about how they build their campaigns or whatever, but you're not actually doing your job as a data engineer, I don't think that's going to help you progress in your career. At the same time, if you're a data engineer and marketing is asking you to do something in a certain way and you don't think that's the right thing to do, I think that it's very important that you know you have that conversation with them.

You need to be careful about how you have that conversation with them to make sure that because people are sensitive, right? And they might feel like, oh, why is this person telling me how to do my job or why is this person telling me that what I'm asking for is completely wrong. People might get very defensive. People get upset and all of that. So you need to do it in a way that doesn't hurt you in the long run. You need to build good relationship. You need to build trust. You need to suggest things in a way that makes the people want to receive them as well and do it in a consultation with them and not just say no you're stupid. You're what you're saying is wrong. But instead of that saying, hey, did you think about what happens if we do this or did you think about the implication of doing that?

Have we considered another approach? You know, do it gently and explore. And also don't make too many assumptions and don't assume that nobody else knows how to do their job because that will not land very well with a lot of people. So you have to be good at doing these things. You need to have relationships and credibility and you need to lead by influencing and not by just telling people because otherwise it's just never going to work. So that's number one. But I think again like one of the problems the data professionals today have is when you go to the doctor you don't say hey doctor can you please prescribe me you know 500 milligrams of this and and you know a knee surgery you come and you tell them the symptoms you tell them what problems you have and what pains you're experiencing and they have the knowledge they have the experience so they diagnose and they tell you okay these are the symptoms so this is what you need many data professionals actually the way they operate is people come to them and say, "Hey, can we build this report or can you build this metric?" And they just do whatever they're being asked without actually thinking and without adding any value along the way. These people will be replaced by, you know, judge before we know it. Because if you don't add value, if you don't ask questions, if you don't give any any valuable inputs and you don't, you know, on the value chain, you're just a technical role, you will probably vanish and disappear. But at the same time as a data professional you're probably the closest person to the data right so just like the doctor you've studied for all these years you know different methodologies you know different way of doing things you know what data is available what data is not available where can we compromise where can we not compromise it's totally valid to say listen like you're asking for this actually we've tried this you know a few times before it doesn't really work how about we consider trying a different approach I don't see why that's very controversial or why that will you know not go down well with people if you do it in a respectful and nice way.

>> Yes, I agree. I do agree that that you know you should be conscious of driving business value. At the same time I believe that a lot of times the dynamics within the organization are such that you know the business decision are going to be ultimately made by say the product people or or even the CEO or or combination of product CEO sales and so forth and you have to be prepared to enter these discussions and come up with your suggestions and walk away without convincing these people.

>> Absolutely. I mean you will never get it 100% your way. That's that's for sure. But I mean, do you have a responsibility here? If you see the business going in the wrong direction or do you see the product building a feature that is not the right thing to build, you can challenge them and say, why why are you building this? You know, how do we know it's going to work? What have we tested? What have we tried? Do we have any experiments? Do we have any data proving this? Do we want to do something like that? Look, in the end of the day, they might still decide to build it because that's what they want to build.

you've tried you will not win all the cases right but that's okay I mean you're still playing your role and you still have the responsibility >> yeah that is that is something I do agree with it's just yeah so basically the point is that to make these things fruitful and these engagements fruitful and all the initiative and ideas that you might bring up have a positive contribution or have been perceived as a positive contribution even if you don't convince other people about them right you have to really up your game in in terms of communication, in terms of engagement, in terms of building relationships. But let's face it, you don't know everything they know. You might not be talking to the same customers they are talking to. You're not seeing some of the, you know, strategic planning or some of the high level data of the company that they are seeing. So sometimes, you know, you just don't have the bit all the information to drive your thinking forward as they do. And so this is something that one has to be prepared for when you enter these kind of discussions.

>> Yeah, absolutely. And the other thing about you know I think you you started mentioning about disruptive questions and disrupting the business. I think that sometimes people don't see the things that you see or you come at things from a different angle and it's okay to ask a lot of questions. I think specifically one of the posts I was talking about on LinkedIn was you know when a data engineer asked me how to grow their career I opened their company's website it's a pet food company and they just started asking a lot of questions about the business okay looking at the website how did you decide which products to put in the front page how do you decide on prices of of each products how do you decide on the categories and all of that these are business questions right I mean I agree there's somebody in the business whose job is to make those decisions, but can you add value with data? And the answer is 100% yes. So, you should ask these questions. You should go to the product manager who's responsible for the homepage and say, how do we decide which products to present and maybe if we're not using enough data, maybe we can use some signals that we have to decide, you know, based on the customer, based on their location, based on the browser, based on all sorts of different things.

Maybe we have cookies. we can decide what products they're more likely to buy. Maybe we can try an experiment. Right? When we think of prices, right, a lot of companies don't think of pricing as a data problem, but actually I mean scraping competitor prices, coming up with a data set that shows, you know, your prices, your competitor prices, and helping you stay competitive in the market is a data project, right? So I think that there are a lot of things that you can do as a data person to push your business forward and people are not thinking about it but you are seeing the opportunity and for you to come in and ask these questions and propose these things I think is going to go a very long way.

>> Uh hopefully so I mean I think that this is also kind of the hallmark of the quality of the organization. You know what if you hit all these walls and you just can't penetrate them. What if you come up with a databased approach like let's take your your example like you know databased approach of identifying competitors pricing coming up with better ways to position products and you just can't get through they just say that you know you're a data person I'm a salesperson I've been doing this for decades I know how to you know price our offerings or I am talking to the customers you don't understand the customers and so what do you do in that case because in that is you know you are relegated to only delivering on the technical aspects of your projects. What would be your recommendation in that case because then it seems that the personal growth within that organization is limited. Yeah, I mean I think the answer is obvious, right? There are some companies in which you hit the ceiling and you cannot grow anymore. And then you have to ask yourself, do I want to stay in a

company that doesn't, you know, facilitate and doesn't support my growth as an individual or do I want to find something different?

The hard truth is, you're right, there are some companies that are very top down, very hierarchical. People don't want opinions. You know, it's not just companies, right? in certain countries, in certain environments, that's going to be the working landscape, right? And you only get projects and the expectation is you just need to execute and that's it. And I don't think you can grow much in these kind of companies, in these kind of environments. I mean, it puts a very low ceiling over the top of your head.

You're going to hit the ceiling very soon. And then what do you do? >> Yep. It's a question that everybody needs to ask themselves. It's it's perfectly fine to stay in this company forever and you know get paid pay the bills and live your life. There's nothing wrong with that. But if you want to continue growing and if your goal is to get to something bigger in your career and try different things and all of that then you're probably not in a place that can support that.

>> Yeah. I think it's also important in this case to as you say like balance personal goals with with your kind of drive to move forward within the organization because of course your personal situation has a multiple angles to it and multiple dimensions to it as well and like how do you you know reconcile that and and reach a balance of do you want to rock the boat hard or do you just want to kind of cruise along for now and let's see how it goes how it goes later. Those are really difficult decisions to make, but they are also very important to navigate.

>> Absolutely. And I think, you know, there are times in life when you're young and hungry and, you know, you just want to keep doing crazy things and work and you're not limited. And there are times when when you have a newborn baby and you're barely sleeping and, you know, you're juggling too many balls in the air and all you want is just stability, right? You don't want work to be crazy and challenging. You just want it to be stable and to be there. So I think that you're absolutely right like you need to see the full picture and say okay can I actually put myself in a position where I disrupt my life right now or disrupt myself to grow and and to get to where I want to be or am I happy where I am and I mean it's an individual thing and both answers are legit at different points in time and it's your choice or make it a choice right and if you decide to stay don't you know go too hard on yourself that you're not growing because that was your decision. Exactly. Yeah.

>> The other thing some people might do is, you know, if I see people who decide to stay in an environment that doesn't foster much growth, but at the same time they start a side hustle or they start doing something else on the side, you know, contributing to open source projects, creating content, you know, doing things on the side that will help them achieve more growth somewhere else, right? Or or prepare to the next phase of their career. spend a lot of time going to meetups, networking, finding mentors outside their company as and doing all the things that will help them make their next career move. You know, not tomorrow morning, but like in one year from now, but they're going to be in a different position. So, that's another thing to consider, right? It's not just stay or go like there's there's a big spectrum in between that you can consider.

>> Yep. Yep. That's that's very much so. Yeah. And basically, this is what Pom was mostly about. And a lot of

times you're not in an organization which really anticipates your initiatives. They just want you to have whatever they gave you done. >> I'll also add that you know what people don't realize if you want to grow as a data leader. As a data leader, it's even more important to know the business and to develop business sense and product sense and to be challenging and asking those questions because in the end of the day as a data engineer, you know, you can probably get by by building a wrong data set that nobody uses or build a dashboard that nobody uses. But if you're the chief data officer of the company and you're not making the metrics move using your data and you're not challenging the business and the product to do better using your data and you're not pushing the boundaries of what's possible, then I would seriously question whether you're the right person for the job. And again, you have to do it in the right way. You cannot just disrupt people and you cannot just step over people's toes and and you know, come across as very aggressive and those kind of things. I mean that that's not going to go down very well 100%. But at the same time you have a responsibility and you know you have to make sure that you're pushing the company and I think that every data professional even if you're just starting right if we think about career growth then in the end like that this is what you're going to get to right chief data officer kind of role or whatever. So, okay, if I'm level five or six right now, but I want to get to level 10 or 11 or whatever, then I need to think about what does that look like and how do I gradually build myself towards that.

>> Yeah. Still balancing this with how it kind of catering to the immediate requests that you receive as well. >> Yeah. And fundamentally, you shouldn't be failing at your job, right? If you're failing at your job, but you're doing all these extracurricular things, and you know, that's not going to go down very well either. Here I think the big threshold comes when you can you can get sponsorship to actually go on a significant size pilot on it. when you can say that you know maybe I did a you know I did my homework I I showed a small P of how this could look like but then to actually see the potential benefits we have to embark on a bigger project and if you can get someone to sign off on that uh so that you can put resources behind it I think that's a big turning point in this case >> and we both know right if you want to borrow a lot of money you need a good credit score so you need to build a lot of credibility before you go and throw yourself into these kind of big projects and ask people to sponsor that and you know you cannot just come in on day one and try to sell the organization a vision because nobody's going to buy that. You need to prove yourself first your ability to execute well. You need to show that and demonstrate that you know what you're doing and gradually you know you will receive more support from the rest of the organization.

>> Yep. And then you rinse and repeat. >> Yeah. >> Exactly. So, thanks everyone for joining us today. Don't forget to like and subscribe if you like this kind of content and you want to get more of that. If you have any questions for me and Akos, you can drop it in the comments. And I hope to see you again next time. Thanks.