



Five Simple Ways to Get Your C-Suite on Board with Data

James Eiloart, Senior Vice President of EMEA
Tableau Software



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Bio: James Eiloart is Tableau Software’s SVP EMEA. Since 2012, James has led Tableau’s development and growth across the region. With over 30 years in the software industry building and leading international sales teams and strong partner ecosystems, James has held executive positions in sales, channel, strategic alliances, and marketing. Prior to Tableau, James was SVP Global Sales at Alterian. He has also served in executive positions at E.piphany and Remedy and crafted his sales skills at Compuware. A skilled speaker and motivator, James is passionate about data literacy and closing the skills gap, working closely with Tableau’s Academic Programme to help develop valuable skills amongst students across EMEA.

Five Simple Ways to Get Your C-Suite on Board with Data

Some think the phrase “data is the new oil” is already overhyped and overused. But if it has shot so quickly to overuse then it’s probably something worthy of attention. Research shows that insights-driven organisations will grow at least seven times faster than global GDP (Forrester, 2018) – so there should be no doubt about the power of data to improve business.



Just as oil prospectors recognised the huge opportunity that came from extracting, processing and harnessing a valuable resource, today’s most successful organisations understand the importance of creating an environment where everyone feels empowered to analyse data to find new insights. This kind of environment – what many refer to as a data-driven culture – is only successful when senior leadership has made data a priority for the entire company.

But for many businesses today, this kind of culture is a major shift and requires change – change in technology, mindset and priorities. For anyone in business, particularly large companies, shifting the ethos and values of an entire company is incredibly difficult. In a survey by NewVantage Partners, just 40 percent of executives reported success in implementing a ‘data-driven’ culture, so there is clearly a significant barrier here.

Amongst organisations struggling to make the transition to becoming data-driven, many cite difficulties in getting C-level support as a significant obstacle. According to research by Forrester Consulting, nearly 50 percent of data professionals expressed a belief that their C-level executives don’t fully support their organisation’s data and analytics strategies.

I'm fortunate in my job that I get to speak with countless customers from diverse geographies and industries. The consistent refrain I hear from them is that building a data-driven organisation is only successful when it's clearly mandated by senior leadership. Securing buy-in at the C-suite and board level is critical. Without their support, changing an organisation's culture in a sustainable and scalable way becomes an uphill battle.

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So how do you do it? How does someone succeed in getting their C-suite involved with becoming a data-driven organisation? It's not a one size fits all solution. Every business is unique and the point you are at in your company's data journey can be completely different to one of your peers. Speaking to customers

who have successfully secured buy-in from the C-suite, they have done so by being bold, putting themselves out there and getting specific about the business benefits and ROI data can bring.

Here is a list of what I consider the top 5 methods that have helped achieve executive buy-in, straight from our customers:

- 1. Choose (a Few) Champions:** Data is being generated by almost every department across an organisation. Getting all stakeholders on board with data at the same time can appear an overwhelming, nearly impossible, task – particularly when you are part of a large organisation with a number of stakeholders. Instead of taking on the whole group, look at 1-2 individuals at the board or C-suite level who have expressed interest in data, or seem curious about the opportunities data can bring. Focus on getting these people on side first by inserting data into your daily conversations. For example, share results about data projects within the business, educate them on data trends over coffee and clarify the data jargon to help them know where they should be paying attention. These conversations are best done in a one-on-one format, so that your champions can feel comfortable asking questions and discussing topics where they may otherwise feel ill-at-ease in larger settings.

Since change is often perceived as a threat, particularly amongst senior leadership, having a few key champions on board with the data opportunity will mean they can speak on your behalf to allay concerns and develop greater understanding about the value of data amongst their peers.

2. Create a Mission Statement: Take it upon yourself to draft a mission statement that clearly states the goal of becoming a data-driven.

It sounds simple, but putting a mission statement up on posters around the office, in e-mail signatures and newsletters, so everyone is aware of a shared goal will generate

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positive momentum throughout the company and make the C-suite take notice. It also keeps that shared ambition front of mind for the entire workforce.

For one customer I spoke to, the mission “We strive to be a data driven business”

acted like a ripple affect across the company. They posted this mission statement around the office, which made it a communal aspiration that each employee contributed to, and ultimately drove behavioural change that made senior leadership take notice.

Just as top athletes and sports teams focus on a singular motto by posting it around the locker room and repeating it in practice, replicate that strategy within a corporate context to establish a collective ambition and get the attention of your leadership.

3. Initiate Roundtable Conversations: When it comes to perceptions about data, the view from the top is that data is often seen as a risk to be mitigated, not an opportunity. This view is short-sighted at best, and at worst, detrimental to business growth. Leadership teams need to understand and recognise that data is a corporate asset and can be utilised across any business function to promote growth both now and in the long-term.

Accept the fact that not all leaders like change and many will need reassurance that opportunities outweigh risks. Several customers I spoke to were able to influence a change in mindset by setting up informal meetings or hosting roundtable discussions

between C-suite decision makers and data leaders within the business to share specific data-driven projects. The roundtables focused on actually looking at the data together to share insights and the resulting decisions – for example, a customer service team sharing how they were able to identify key obstacles to online purchases in the data to then take action on improving that experience for customers.

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The result of these roundtables was that the C-suite walked away with an understanding of the business impact from data-driven insights. Additionally, data leaders within the business were motivated by the chance to share their work and offer recommendations directly to their company’s senior leadership.

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4. Take Time for Trivia: Find ways to incorporate data-driven questions into existing meetings. Come armed with data insights about the business when meeting the senior management team and the board. Encourage them to ask numerical questions about company results and guess at answers. For example, where is our company’s most profitable region? What industries are highest and lowest growth? What are our top performing products?

One customer shared that by asking these seemingly simple, data-driven questions about their own company’s results, senior leadership quickly understood that they often didn’t know the answers and appreciated the insights.

Like the roundtables, bringing data to the heart of business conversations, gives leaders the opportunity to learn more about the company from a data-driven perspective, and even ask follow-up questions to understand ‘why’ something is happening. The aim here

is to achieve “ah-ha” moments amongst your senior leadership by building appreciation not only of what the data can show but how it can impact business direction and decisions.

5. Point to Other Companies: Share the impact data can have on business by calling out companies that are getting their data strategy right. One customer sent out the list of FTSE 100 companies to leaders within their organisation, making the point that those at the top of the list were data driven. In a simple way, this proves the power of data, and that it is achievable for companies across industries.

Take this a step further by communicating this message to all employees via email, posters, and presentations, touting the connection between today’s top companies and being data- driven. Because numbers often talk louder than words, you can include key statistics to drive awareness – for example, on average data-driven organisations outperform other companies by five times. This tactic helps to drive the ROI message to the C-suite while creating motivation and momentum within the business.

“Without data you’re just another person with an opinion.”

W. Edwards Deming

Additionally, leaders will have a better idea of what their competitive advantage could be over time and offers a clear, realistic and achievable target that should appeal and help drive change.

It was W. Edwards Deming that said, “Without data you’re just another person with an opinion”. But businesses cannot grow on opinions. Having your senior leadership on board with the value of data is absolutely key to developing a sustainable and scalable data culture. These methods may seem simple, even surprising, but they have worked for a number of customers at companies that are leading the competition thanks to being data driven. So be bold, try something new and take the first step to changing your company’s culture.

About Tableau

Tableau helps extract meaning from information. It's an analytics platform that supports the cycle of analytics, offers visual feedback, and helps you answer questions, regardless of their evolving complexity. If you want to innovate with data, you want an application that encourages you to keep exploring—to ask new questions and change your perspective. If you're ready to make your data make an impact, download a free trial of Tableau Desktop today.

About the Author:



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