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Data Mesh Radio Episode #266: Leveraging Decades of Information Architecture Learnings to Do Data Well

Interview with Akins Lawal

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0:00:00 Scott Hirleman

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0:00:07 Adrian Estala

Welcome to Data Mesh Radio with your host, Scott Hirleman, sponsored by Starburst. This is Adrian Estala, VP and Field CDO at Starburst and host of Data Mesh TV. Starburst is the leading contributor to Trino, the open source project and the [Data Mesh For Dummies](#) book that I cowrote with Colleen Tartow and Andy Mott. To claim your free book, head over to starburst.io.

0:00:38 Scott Hirleman

Data Mesh Radio is provided as a free community resource by Data Mesh Understanding. It is produced and hosted by me, Scott Hirleman. I started this podcast as a place for practitioners to get useful information about data mesh, and we're at over 200 episodes. I have now left DataStax, thanks for all their help in founding things, but I've left to start Data Mesh Understanding, which is also helping practitioners to get to the information needed to do data mesh well. We have free implementer introduction and roundtable programs in addition to the more advanced yet affordable offerings, so please do get in touch if you're looking for more information on how to do, how to approach data mesh. Just check datameshunderstanding.com for more info. There's also a helpful organization of past data mesh radio episodes there, if you want to dig into specific topics rather than digging through 200 different episodes. So with that, let's hit the funky intro music and listen to what you'll hear about in this interview episode.

Episode 266: Leveraging Decades of Information Architecture Learnings To Do Data Well. Bottom line up front, what are you gonna hear about and learn about in this



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episode? I interviewed Akins Lawal, a Data Strategist at Schema for Success. To be clear, he was only representing his own views on the episode. So here are some key takeaways or thoughts from Akins' point of view. Number one, far too often in data, people move to build something instead of focusing on building good information architecture specific to the task at hand and the organizational goals and capabilities. Number two, good information architecture isn't about tech, it's about the principles and practices of how you're going to structure your data and information. Number three, keep going back to good product principles in information architecture, your focus should be on what you are trying to accomplish over what you are trying to build.

Number four, potentially controversial, organizations need to focus far more on hiring for learning capacity instead of only for current skills. The world is changing too quickly to try to focus on specific skills for many data-intensive jobs. A lot of those tools are gonna be legacy relatively quickly. Number five, leadership buy-in ends up being the number one determining factor of success for projects and transformation according to many studies, trying to proceed even with the greatest plan ever without that buy-in greatly reduces the chances of success. And the same thing with kind of moving forward with not the best plan, but a ton of backing will mean you still have a better chance than just a perfect plan, but not that backing.

Number six, maturity models can be extremely helpful, but they sometimes don't tell the full story. Look for pockets of maturity in your organization and see what can be copied or replicated from them, and what can't when improving the maturity of other areas of the organization. What is actually specific to that one specific area and what can actually be replicated. Number seven, I think this one is controversial, there is something different about information exchange in person, rather than entirely virtual. It is far more likely to create a deeper understanding if you can collaborate and white-board in the same room. A personal note here, I'm 50-50 on this, a big question is cost benefit of mental energy, travel, etcetera. Better return doesn't always mean better return on investment, but I do think we all know that human interaction is different in-person. Number eight, let people know that "data is more of a tool to empower that also needs to be woven into the organizational fabric."

Number nine, reward people for appropriately sharing their data. At the start, accolades can be enough, but if you really understand incentives, it should become something more deeply rewarded. If you want people to share their data, reward them, incentivize that to happen. Number 10, people, process, tools, but it always comes back to people being the most important. People wanna focus on tools first, process second, and people third, and that's where you're gonna get yourself in trouble. And finally, number 11, you can focus on and improve your culture, no matter the size of an organization, from 2 to 200,000 people, really think about where you



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want your data culture to head, and you can focus on that very early in your journey or you can start to improve it later in the organization's life. Okay, enough of just me. Let's hear from our awesome guest in this interview episode.

Okay. After a bit of technical difficulties, I'm very, very excited for today's episode. I've got Akins Lawal here who is a Data Strategist and he is only representing his own views though today, just to be clear. We're gonna talk a lot about a lot of different things about how do we think about getting to a culture of actually being one with data, being driven by data, how do we think about not trying to have the data make all the choices, but how do we think about actually getting people not just skilled with data, but understanding how to leverage it, understanding how to use it? How can we take what we've learned from past paradigms, how can we do all of that stuff to be better with data that a lot of people are having these problems of just trying to do the technical and not really focusing on the things that are gonna have the best long-term change impact for the organization. But before we get into that, Akins, if you don't mind, if you give people a bit of an introduction to yourself and then we can jump into the conversation at hand.

0:07:52 Akins Lawal

I appreciate that, Scott. So once again, I'm Akins Lawal. I like to consider myself a data strategist, knowledge manager and creator, all in one. I kinda like to say I'm old school. I come from an old school relational data background, and you sprinkle some business on top of that and that's kind of where I fall. I've got 20 years or so in industry doing all sorts of data management implementations for the federal government and for the private sector.

0:08:27 Scott Hirleman

Yeah. And I'm really excited to talk about what we had talked about in the pre-call, which was when we think about content management systems and we think about how data sharing's been done, we can learn a lot from that past experience. So I'd love to start there about how do you think about... 'Cause a lot of people say data mesh isn't new, and I kind of disagree with that 'cause I think the pieces themselves aren't new, but the way that they're put together is new.

So it's a bit like if a book uses only words that existed before, is it new or is it not? And that's kind of how I think about it. Maybe it's not even quite that unique and novel, but it's still like, okay, maybe it's your Lego set and you've created something that's... I remember having this bucket of Legos as a kid and just building all this weird stuff. But what did you see in those past things that really could be leveraged well when we think about doing data mesh and trying to be good at actually doing data mesh?

0:09:35 Akins Lawal



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No, no, I think that's a great question, great segue into I think what we're gonna be talking about today. You mentioned content management systems. And so the first thing that really comes to my mind is information architecture, and I think we talked about this a little bit. A lot of what I've seen in the past is there's always a lot of putting the horse before the cart, right? I think people just wanna build something, they don't necessarily think about it from the perspective of why they're building it and who the respective users are gonna be.

And I think taking an approach where you think about the individual users or the people that are gonna be using the system is super important in the sense that it just really allows for more granular management, I think, in the future, and it allows you to be able to implement respective or better data governance practices in place as you're moving forward. And so a lot of times I would come into these respective organizations or these implementations and information architecture in itself is kind of an afterthought. And then now, we're trying to organize data in a way that's usable for everybody. And so from that perspective, I think information architecture is something that a lot of organizations miss right off the bat. And it's something that I think folks need to definitely be paying attention to as we move forward or as you start to implement or any type of data management endeavor.

So that being said, like I said, thinking about the information architecture, you start to think about your contextual frameworks for that information architecture. I think that's super important. You're looking at how data relates to each other. Like I mentioned before, I come from a relational background, and so when you start to do that, what you end up realizing is that data is kind of social, and the way that we use data is social. And so understanding who is responsible for X, Y, Z, particular data set...

0:12:03 Scott Hirleman

So as Zencast has been absolutely doing every single time, we had a little bit of another audio issue here. So, Akins, can you give us a little bit of a summary of what you were saying there, and then we can kind of jump through into the next part of the conversation, 'cause it was really great until my thing went off.

0:12:26 Akins Lawal

It's all right, Scott. I think we've all been there. The technology sometimes is not always our best friend, but yeah, I was really just talking about information architecture and how a lot of times it's an afterthought, right? So you think about these content management systems, you think about how we're gonna put things together and ensure people can find the right information that they need, it's not until after they've rolled it out or someone's bought a tool that they decide that they wanna actually start talking about how we make this useful for everybody, right? And so I think conceptually, you miss everything when you just kinda jump the gun and



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put the horse before the cart. So that's really what we were talking about in that last segment.

0:13:08 Scott Hirleman

Yeah, and I think it's... I think this, I've had a couple of people talking about smearing data governance on at the end and things like that, where it's like, "Hey, no, this stuff needs to be part of what you're doing from the start, 'cause otherwise it is just meh." Like, it just doesn't end up really working at the end. So yeah, I think on that point, what I'd like to dig into about the information architecture and what you're saying there is what are the things that need to be done when, right?

And I know that's an incredibly broad question, but let's talk about those things that you think that people really miss. When you talk about information architecture, people immediately jump to architecture and they think that this is about, again, the tooling. Are you talking about the practices? Are you talking about the way the practice is merged with the tooling? What does that mean just so people can understand what you mean there?

0:14:05 Akins Lawal

No, no, that's a great question, Scott. I think a lot of, like you said, folks hear information architecture, they think tech or back-end, but it's really more a set of principles and practices around how we're gonna structure things. And I think it also really ties into the substance and what we're gonna be talking about today around implementing a culture of data and that sort of thing. You really have to get people involved. Anything else, it's always people, processes and tools first. And so from an IA perspective, I'll start calling it IA. So one of the first things that you got to do is, like I said, you always gotta figure out what we're trying to share here, who's gonna have access to what, how many people are we gonna have in this particular system, what is it gonna do for them, how they're gonna find what it is that they need, how do we get them the right information at the right time?

So when you start thinking about it from that perspective, what you realize is it's people-centric, and it's not about tooling, it's not about technology, it's really about who's gonna be involved. And so when you look at it that way, some of the first things that you start to do is you start to pull together your champions. It's like, who do we know that is gonna be involved? Who do we know is gonna get behind this? How do we get all these things together? And then from that perspective, I think I mentioned the idea of a conceptual model. So the conceptual model is really looking at your organization or looking at the particular space in which you wanna implement something like a CMS and figuring out how do all the different data points relate to one another? Who from what particular portions or department of the organization are gonna be leveraging this thing?



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How can we ensure that it fits our business model? 'Cause the one thing that you don't want is a conceptual model that's completely outside of the scope of your business model and the two of them don't really meet up 'cause then you yourself in a situation whereby we built this thing, no one can find what it is they want, it doesn't really have any relation to what I do on a daily basis. And so that's also an important piece of it. And so you get the individuals in the room, like I said, who are gonna be the most, I guess the folks that are probably most likely use the tool the most and kinda go through these exercises, like, there's different things that you could do like card sorting exercises where you're looking at your conceptual model, your business model and figuring out what's the best way to really organize this data.

There might be a department that looks at it from the perspective of, "We like to organize our stuff this way," and then they got another department that it's like, "Hey, we like to organize our stuff that way." And so when you're doing that, you're actually trying, you're coming to a happy medium. And that's the whole point of IA. It's like, how do we get it to the point that it makes sense for everyone in the organization, and we can move forward with, yes, it's not 100% how this particular group might want it, but it works for everybody. So I think that's part of it.

0:17:22 Scott Hirleman

That whole thing of nobody's happy, so we think we found... Like nobody is super angry, but nobody's happy, so we think we found the right mix. And yeah, Christoph Spohr had said something on a recent episode too about when he's going in even with data mesh, he's like, "How does this team work? And how do the leaders of this line of business or whatever think about IT systems so when I talk to them, I understand what their background is so I can actually communicate with them appropriately." So it might be something that would work for them, but if you pitch it in the wrong way, it's not gonna be great versus the other way around.

So I'd love to start to meld what you were saying there and talking about brownfield versus greenfield, and talk about like, there's stuff that is already... Nobody comes to data mesh or nobody should be coming to data mesh from day one of the company, there's just not that need. So these are more advanced companies, so we are working in that kind of brownfield type of situation as an organization. But how do you think about figuring out what is gonna work? How do you think about testing that? Is that still kind of a theory and you just kinda, you've gotta do your work and put yourself in place to think you found something good and then test it and iterate it? But then how do you meld that in as well? And I know this is a difficult multi- part question, but I just wanna hear how you think about this, of how do you start to meld that in with that cultural change around data?



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0:19:00 Akins Lawal

No, no, that's... Yeah, that is a fact question. I don't know, let's peel it back some. I think and it is, for me personally, like I said, I've been through a bunch of implementations, I've had the opportunity to bring people on board and to help support respective projects. I've also kind of come at it from the perspective of bringing individuals on from other parts of the organization who are gonna be pivotal to the implementation. And so that data culture piece, really for me personally, it starts before you even walk through the door. And I think a lot of times organizations don't really look at it like that. They just, okay, I'm hiring somebody, but you should be also hiring a learner, right?

And so even as an individual, you got employees who are, "I just know how to do this and this is what I do and I do this well, so don't bother me." That's not really the type of person that you want. So I think in this particular day and age, I think I mentioned it earlier, we're in the knowledge age, right? It's like you have to hire learners not necessarily people who can do the job, but folks who understand that when I come into a specific role, the requirement of me, like one of the softer requirements is that I need to continuously learn.

And so when you have individuals that have that type of mindset, what you typically encounter is someone who's willing to solve problems. And so we all know that these are major problems, data is a problem. It's almost like data woke up and said, "Hey, I am a problem." I like to use the analogy of data is like an algebraic problem, it wants to be balanced so it's always gonna present you with problems. So you need someone who's a lifelong learner who knows how to solve problems, so that is part of the culture. So before they even walk in the door, I'm looking for a learner. And I think a lot of organizations don't necessarily do that, but that's not something you can do all the time, right? It's not...

0:21:23 Scott Hirleman

Brownfield, right? And yeah, you're talking about attitude versus aptitude but like yes, if you're coming into an organization and going, "Okay, we have to fire all the people that aren't learners," like you're going to clean house or anything like that. So how do you think about testing what is gonna work, right? How do you think about figuring out how to switch people? I mean, we could talk about how do you build that culture so that the learners can advance, but maybe we can also talk about how do you think about, if you can, switching somebody from a doer to a learner, like instead of just, "This is my thing and this is what I do," you're kind of singing my song because if you look at my resume, my resume is chaos because I've just done all these different things 'cause it's just like, "Oh yeah, I could do that. Let me figure out how that works." And then you start to really advance the practice instead of just coming in and just doing.



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0:22:20 Akins Lawal

Well, yeah. I mean, you're a lifelong learner but like you said, not everybody's born that way, not everybody thinks that way. And I think from that perspective, then there's also like a portion of leadership buy in. I'm sure everybody who's listening to this podcast understands that the likelihood of something actually succeeding is greatly improved when you've got leadership buy in and you've got folks at the top kind of letting everybody know that this is something that they want to see. And so you can go, there's countless reviews. I mean, the Harvard Business Review, McKinsey, I'm sure if you go and look for them, they've got all the ridiculous statistics around what happens when leadership actually buys into some of these initiatives.

So it's almost like there's a direct correlation between whether or not it's gonna be successful, whether or not it's going to fail based on the amount of leadership. Almost to the extent that I'm not sure if you're familiar with CMI, they've released their new framework that in essence almost completely changes how they processed or graded organizations based on leadership involvement. And so when you see stuff like that, you realize the importance of leadership because like you said, not everybody's gonna go and do it. Some people have to be told this is what needs to be done.

Unfortunately, or unfortunately, that's just kind of the nature of human beings, right? So it's like when you think about it from that perspective, then you realize, okay, this is why these things have to happen. And so I like to take a dogmatic just real logical approach to things. So it's like you get the folks that are ready to lead and work 'cause they're probably gonna be the ones that consist of the majority of the work that's gonna happen and push things forward. And then you get the other folks that are being told what to do. You get them to kind of tag along because they have to. So I think that's really how you have to look at it.

0:24:36 Scott Hirleman

Yeah. Well, and that said, that like... I mean, it's funny that you're bringing up algebraic formulas and stuff, that the people where you have to give them formulaic instructions are not... It's like, why do we do this this way? What is this trying to accomplish if somebody doesn't know that and has to go through the exact same steps? If something has changed, they won't change any of the steps, right? Well, and a little of what you were talking about actually tangentially relates to what Beth Bauer was talking about in her episode about trust. And 55%, like some study or whatever reviewed what actually generates trust and 55% of trust in data is the relationship, the relationship between the two sides. It's not about the actual quality, it's not about these other aspects, it's literally do I... Akins I trust you so therefore, when you come to me and say like you can use this data, I'm gonna trust you, and



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I'm gonna trust you to tell me how much I can use it. "Well, use it for this, but don't get overly reliant 'cause it's a little bit, we're still not sure on this, we're still suspect." And being able to have that conversation is so important.

So like how do you think about an organization, like measuring where an organization is relative to this data culture of being able to have that learning, that expansive, that ability to go out there and actually change what you're doing and do things different. How do you think about what... If you were to go into an organization, what would you actually kind of say to them or look for?

0:26:19 Akins Lawal

Yeah. I mean, anybody who's been in my field understands the importance of maturity models. Some people use them religiously, others kind of it's more of a, it's a tool kit for me to really come in and assess things. Typically when I'm coming in, I'm looking for leadership and what leadership is trying to do, and then I'm also looking for the champions. And so like between the two of those different factions, you can kind of see where an organization is kind of at a very high level, but I think there are some nuanced things that you can do in order to kind of measure where an organization is from a maturity perspective.

And so throughout the years, I've implemented several maturity models like typical consultant, you come in, you ask the questions, you determine who the respective players are, and you kind of can make an assessment as to this is where we are and this is where we start. And so my background has always been you do that and then you prescribe something that the organization can take away or they can use. But normally when that type of things happens, you realize that it's kind of all over the place. You've got some parts of the organization that are extremely mature and they do, they understand data, they've got a culture, and then you got another part of it that needs a lot of help, right?

You really just want to try and replicate what you're doing in other parts of the organization to kind of save money, save resources, and not necessarily reinvent the wheel, but going to that trust piece and I think we, you were gonna keep hitting on it and it's a people thing. So that relationship piece is super important because like you said, if I know that, Scott, you're down the hall from me and you produce and you work on this and you're trusted and vetted in your respective space and you say it is what it is, then there's so much nuance and data that you can tell me what I need to be worried about when I'm talking about it. And I think people always miss the mark when they miss the relationship.

0:28:41 Scott Hirleman

And creating that space for ambiguity, creating that space of, like, hey, this might not



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be perfect, or we haven't fully done this and that it's not that the data is either right or the data is wrong, it's how much, how reflective of reality is this? It's not a one or a zero, like that's doing data work, that's focusing on data for the sake of data instead of, what are we trying to do? We're trying to share information with each other about what's happening in the real world or what we expect or like all of that stuff, so we can't have a perfect representation of that, but like how close can we get and how much can we trust it and having that like when I tell you the data quality isn't perfect and you don't go, "Well, then it's wrong." It's like, no, we need to figure out what matters and that aspect.

So I'd love to hear a little bit more about like when you're thinking about helping a company mature, how would you go about that? Maybe not lay out your exact training plan or anything like that, but how would you go about communicating that need to, "Hey, don't just take this online training course, actually start to communicate with each other," is that workshops, is that like having to manually connect people one to one? I have to do that in the data mesh space sometimes of, "Okay, hi, you need to meet this other person, and here's why." But like how do you think that that could go well?

0:30:13 Akins Lawal

Yeah, I think we've all kind of forgotten how to do that in COVID times or whatever, right? What I also think is it's space too. I'm sure... I've been in several organizations where folks are spread out geographically, there have been organizations where everyone is consolidated on the same floor and communication just happens by chance. I happen to be in the kitchen grabbing coffee, and then I see my colleague, and it's like, all right, let's talk about this, you got five minutes, let's really talk this through. And so there's something about the physical contact piece that I think can't be replicated. I think we all kind of agree that, yes, it's great that we've got this technology, but being able to kind of sit in a room with someone and kind of whiteboard things out, there's certain things that happen that don't necessarily happen I think from a virtual perspective.

The studies will talk about that but regardless of that, you can still do a lot of things in a virtual environment and still be just as productive about how we talk through things. I think a lot of times, for me personally just it equates to more repetition. So I think in the virtual environment, you just need more, you need to see folks more. And you got to fill that time that you don't get that physical interaction with more interaction, whether it's collaborating or talking or figuring something out. So I think that's something that I've done in the past where I've got teams that are dispersed geographically. It's like if we're not gonna actually be able to physically meet, we're just going to meet more, but not necessarily for the sake of meeting, just to make sure that we're not missing anything. And then once that trust is established, then



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it's a matter of, okay, now we can start to kind of scale back on things. But like I said, I've done this for a while, like there's, like I said, you got different pillars like Agile and frameworks and methodologies that talk about people, people, people. And so we're gonna talk about people, people, people. And I think until people really understand what that means, we're gonna continue to see these problems kind of manifest themselves. And I think it's just a perpetual problem that I think is just intrinsic of work, in essence. And because data is not something, I call it the tangible intangible, because it's something that we don't necessarily see, but it's still so important.

I think that's what kind of lends to this kind of the haphazard, I guess, relationship or view on it's important, but it's not that important 'cause I think people get involved with the day to day, the operations of business, they don't necessarily think about data should always be at the forefront when we're doing things because it's really the lifeblood of the organization. I think it's like we say it, but we don't do it. And so until those things match, we're gonna have those problems. So getting organizations to that is what I've always tried to do. Like you say this is super important, but until we match the action with intent, we're gonna have these problems. And so that's what I focus on a lot of times.

0:33:37 Scott Hirleman

Well, and I think for me, I kind of disagree with a little bit of the nuance of what you're saying because I think we... For me, execution eats data for breakfast. And that means two different things because execution is more important than the data but execution can be powered by what you eat. When something eats the other thing for breakfast, maybe it's powered by that. And so that's where we have to flip that of like companies are built on execution, they're not built on information. But it's leveraging that information to be so much better at execution. Yes, people think of data as only strategy and that's so limiting.

And so a lot of what you're saying, I think there are so many companies that don't have... Like personally, I don't run my company on data, right? Because I'm a one person shop, I know a bunch of things, I just have it in my head I don't have to be, like I need to be super, super data driven versus for me, it's all relationship driven even though all the stuff I'm doing is around data. It's very funny in a lot of ways. Same thing with Zhamak's company, Nextdata, if they were doing data mesh, I'd be like... And I was advisor to them, I'd be like, "What are you doing?" They aren't doing that. They know better 'cause they don't need it right now.

But so much of where we think about culture is either/or instead of how do we make data that additive, how do we make it so that people aren't afraid that the data is taking their job, is taking away their agency, and that it's just making them that



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much better? Like you're navigating down this river, without data you're trying to spot the rocks, but if you've got like a sonar system, you can much better navigate through because you've got something that's telling you, but you're still having somebody that's spotting the rocks 'cause sometimes the LIDAR system on the self driving car doesn't understand that that's a person and not just a phantom image or something like that and it has to not ignore the small object 'cause that is a child, not just something that...

0:36:00 Akins Lawal

That makes sense. I think to that point around, it's just part of or it's an additive, it's an add on, like we've been doing this, like you said, people have been in business for thousands of years, people have been in some form or way figuring out how to make it happen, whether it lives in their head or they're writing it down on scrolls. So I think from that perspective, it really boils down to how you're actualizing it and using it. And that's more, I think, on the knowledge side, maybe my knowledge management brain, it doesn't necessarily mean anything until ideation, or at least until that ideation phase, like knowledge is not necessarily valuable until ideation. You got all these things, you can have the... But until it's actually being leveraged or used, it's not necessarily valuable.

And so I think from that perspective, going back to letting people know that data is more of a tool to empower, that also needs to be woven into the organizational fabric. I came from a very large organization or corporation that it was all about empowering its people to make decisions and so intrinsically their... What they wanted for their data initiatives and what they wanted for their people were aligned and so it kind of worked. And so from that perspective, you had people who were, if I see something, I can kind of talk and do something about it, if I see something that's wrong. And so it's great in the sense that you've got folks who are able to take, or at least feel like they can make decisions or feel like they can speak up, but sometimes it just tends to blow things up.

And so you still have to make that demarcation and figure out who's responsible for X, Y, and Z or you're just gonna have multiple people who are not gonna come to consensus on anything. So I think that is something that's intrinsically important or related to what you just mentioned before about how do I make it an extension, right? That empowerment piece has to come in. And then I think we talked about that before, like this is all part of what leadership and how leadership, its role can make or break whatever type of data project or implementation that you're doing. So that alignment has to happen. And so you've got to let your folks know that this is what's needed and this is how we expect you to react or this is how we want you, envision you to be able to use this information, this data that's available to you.



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0:38:58 Scott Hirleman

I mean, I think I've got some of the answers or as I expect what you're gonna say, but I'd love to hear, so say somebody is like, okay, Akins, 100% dead on. I wanna listen to exactly what you're saying, but how do I actually start to implement that in my company? How do I start to think about in my data literacy program, like actually getting people to do this is if... Like, it's almost like you're teaching empathy, which is frustrating in certain ways, but sometimes you have to just remind people that they've got to have that empathy. And a lot of times people are like, "Oh wow, this thing you did really changed even the trajectory of my career," or like, "Wow, this thing was so helpful." And it was like, I spent 30 seconds introducing you to somebody 'cause I knew they were gonna be helpful to you and then I didn't have to do the work. So I spent 30 seconds to do something that was good for you, but that I also didn't have to do that work. But I said something and I spent that extra 30 seconds.

When I was a recruiter, I called people up every Friday and every Monday and every Wednesday I would check in and every Friday I would actually call and then Monday, Wednesday was email. But even if it was no update, that they knew that I hadn't ghosted on them, that I hadn't disappeared on them. That little simple empathy had these people saying, "You're the best recruiter I've ever worked with." And I'm like, that is a terrifying sentence 'cause I'm not a good recruiter yet and that's why I left doing that. But like that's terrifying. So how do we get that to people being like actually absorbing what you were saying instead of just going, "Yeah, yeah, that sounds great. That would be better if everybody else did that but I'm already doing that, aren't I?" And it's like, "No." So how do you think about getting an organization to do that?

0:40:51 Akins Lawal

That's a great question 'cause now you're making me think about instances where that happened. That's what we're trying to get to. So speaking of recruitment, I actually did a stint, kind of really more so just kind of using my data background to kind of help foster a sense of leveraging data to improve performance and recruitment in a specific area of an organization that I supported. And so when I came into that organization, there was a lot of data all over the place, people were living in spreadsheets, and so... Everybody was doing their own reporting, there was like really no standards. I think you really got to come in and ensure that you can provide some results quickly. I think that's really the buy-in.

It's just like anything, it's like you put a cream on your face and the wrinkles go away, like I'm bought in. And so from that... I'm a life longer, it's like... And so I think data professionals have a tendency to kind of talk in generics and philosophically about things sometimes. And I think if you really wanna show the value, you've got to really



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get it and give somebody some stuff really quickly. And so that's something that I always try to do, right? Whether it's like, "Hey, let's consolidate this stuff. It's all over the place, now we've got something we can run some reports on." Like, "Oh wow, I didn't know we could do this." Like, it's really that simple.

And I think as a data professional, that's something that you've got to have in your back pocket, right? So showing the results right away, getting in there, showing people that this is beneficial to them, but it's really only through actionable, tangible results. So if you can't do that, you're not going to get that buy-in. Like you said, I'm not gonna understand why I should share my data, I've got all this stuff and I don't share it 'cause I'm a hoarder and I don't want anybody to know that I have this versus, "Hey, let's share this stuff and look at the accolade that you've gotten. Now people are coming to you and asking you for X, Y, and Z."

So being able to show that you, one, have value I think is more valuable in this particular environment that we're in now. And so from, like I said, the leadership perspective, you got to empower your people to understand that I'm gonna reward you when you share, not when you hoard, right? And so that has to happen right off the bat. And then a lot of times it doesn't. And so when I'm coming in and having those conversations that I talked about, this is all part of that vetting process. Are your people rewarded for sharing data? Like it's really that simple. And if you can... One of those questions is really that simple. And when I'm doing the assessment around the maturity piece, so it's like, all right, if I can come in and I can show, oh yeah, I'm rewarding my people, then we're making some progress, right? How many conversations are people having around data? So you start asking those questions and then you really can kind of get to where things are. So going back to your question around what it is, show results. Everybody, BS walks, what you said, BS walks, money talks, like you got to show results. And so you got to be able to come in and do that. That's really what it boils down to though at times.

0:44:15 Scott Hirleman

Well, and literally, there was a LinkedIn post today by Manuel Pais, who's one of the guys from Team Topologies. And I think it was something, it was incentives eats strategy for breakfast or incentives eats execution for breakfast. And I made a joke about are we doing the ouroboros or whatever, and all of these things keep eating each other. And it's, this eats this, this eats, and it's rock, paper, scissors or whatever, that they all end up beating each other or eating each other. But it is, like incentivization is what matters, right? Like, how are you thinking because there are some people that are intrinsically motivated to help others, but if you don't prove with your actual incentivization that this matters to the organization, then the people that are kind of in it for themselves, which is a lot more people than we'd like to admit.



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Even I had this conversation today where somebody was like, "Yeah, can you just help me out and do all of this work for me?" And I'm like, "No. I need money to do that. I need money to live. So, yeah, I would love to help you out but no," like, that's why I've built up a lot of value in my network. And so, but that incentivization and understanding how your incentives are even communicating to each other. I think a lot of what you're talking about is, what has come through that works for a lot of people is no matter what happened from the result of this data, the people who present to the exec staff as to this use case was so great, it was whoever's data it was, it wasn't whoever executed on it, whoever presented it 'cause the line of business is getting the actual bottom line results.

So the ones that are the data producers are the ones that are getting the credit. And so you're like, okay, your incentives hit both sides and it's not just about like, "Yeah, yeah, this data was important, but it was all our execution." Well, then I'm not gonna spend as much time serving you data. If you're so good at execution, then I don't have to spend as much time working with you on that stuff. So, yeah, I fully agree with you. It's just, it's so important and we don't talk about it nearly enough in data.

0:46:37 Akins Lawal

No, incentivizing your org, your team members is probably like one of the biggest things. And I think as much as you don't wanna hand out golden stars or whatever, you kind of have to hand out golden stars 'cause like if it's not, you're gonna get an award like people, money, people like to see money and so whether it's, if you're an organization then you can do that, I strongly would encourage that. It's like, how do you...

And then it's not just that, I think to that point, this is like maybe on a more serious topic, it's rewarding those those people in a way that matters to that particular individual. A lot of times you have people who do these things, but they don't get that recognition. And so you can't allow, everyone knows that this person does great and people will say it, but somehow management or leadership kind of overlooks it. So I think for me, that's also important. Like, really looking at the folks that are providing value and rewarding them in some way is super important when it comes to this.

0:47:55 Scott Hirleman

Well, I've got two little things on that one, the gold stars, I really like NAV, their reward system, which is when somebody produces a data product, their whole team gets like a gourmet cake sent to them.

0:48:08 Akins Lawal



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Oh wow.

0:48:08 Scott Hirleman

And so, like, literally they... Yeah, I'm like, cake driven development. People are like, "What is that?" It's like, you give them a cake when they develop something. And it was just like, "Okay, that's wild but..." And then... And I totally lost my train of thought. There was another thing that... Sorry, what were you saying right at the end?

0:48:29 Akins Lawal

I think I talked about the leaders and like rewarding the people that's, sometimes people get overlooked. Yeah.

0:48:35 Scott Hirleman

So like love languages. I don't know if you've seen the way people talk about love languages and then I read a book about love languages, but in the workplace. And so it's like, hey, touch is probably not the best love language to be using in the workplace. But like exactly what you're talking about what is valuable to people, for me, yes, I need money and things like that, but at the same point, I've got enough things that I can probably generate money if I really go out and try real hard to do that, that exact thing. But a lot of it is just like taking stuff off my plate. You take stuff off my plate and you're my best friend, I love you. That I don't have to do this? Like, when I try and tell people, "Hey, you should connect with this person," and they're like, "Can you do the introduction?" And then they want me to even do the...

0:49:24 Akins Lawal

The write up for it.

0:49:25 Scott Hirleman

Half of the first meeting, to be like, "Can you facilitate this meeting so I get that thing from that person?" And so, yeah, I think that incentivization and going down to that level, and you can't always be perfect on it. Sometimes you do just have to be like, we're just throwing money at this 'cause we see this but like also, I hate personal recognition, but most people don't. So you're like, hey, we're gonna throw you some money and we're gonna do some personal recognition and we're gonna see, or we're gonna say, "Hey, you've opened up this."

So like I'm reading these books that are, like this goofy fantasy series, it's called LitRPG, or that's the genre. But what are you getting... Like, what is your contribution and then what is a value to... There's a contribution system that tracks your contribution, and then there's a, what do you wanna buy with that contribution? And that you can have like, oh, you get some company swag, or hey, you bought a day off, or, hey, like that stuff is so, it's somewhat difficult somewhat to implement, but even trying to talk to people about doing that, like that we recognize that you need that.



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0:50:40 Akins Lawal

You need that but I think that's also part of the feedback loop. I know we've talked a lot about a bunch of things, but I mean, there kind of is a basic formula that you'd wanna follow when you're doing these type of things. And for me, that I think what you were just talking about, that just comes into that basic, let's get feedback on what we're doing. That's part, or that's an important piece of it, as you mature as an organization, as you're trying to do these different things, you've got different processes that you have to follow but that feedback loop is extremely important in gauging how your employees or the people who are part of the organization are feeling about the program and what's happening.

And so a lot of times I don't think we poll enough, right? So in the e-commerce space, you see it all the time. They're constantly, like you said, iterating, testing all the time. It's consistent. They're getting that feedback, but you don't, in every data space, you don't always get that immediate feedback from your people because it's like, alright, maybe it's I'm producing a data product that's gonna take me longer than X, Y, and Z. So before I can even get there, it's gonna take me a while to get to these results. The same thing with people, right? It's like, how are our people feeling? And I think a lot of times organizations don't ping their people enough to really gauge. You might have some folks who are in the mix or like, oh yeah, they go to leadership and they tell 'em, "Hey, everyone's not happy right now with the current changes and okay, we need to figure something else about that. We need to do something about that." But I don't think it's done enough. At least I haven't seen it done enough, so.

0:52:27 Scott Hirleman

I strongly agree. Like, Alice Parker who's been on a couple of different episodes because she did her master's thesis literally on the data mesh implementation at the company she's working at and it was on human computer interaction. And so it was like, how... Like, it was so much about going and interviewing these people and figuring out the user experience and what they needed and we just don't... Like data user experience, I kept trying to talk about this and trying to get people to use DUX and it was like, quack, quack, we need some ducks up in here, but that concept is still so foreign and we can't really control the user experience of a data product because it's really controlled through the platform if you're doing the right things.

'Cause then otherwise every data product has its own complete unique user experience. And even if those are all great, that's a terrible system 'cause it's not scalable 'cause somebody has to... So, but like, so much of what you're saying is just like pop up to a higher level and think about what are you trying to accomplish and how are you gonna make it easy for people to accomplish that and focus on that instead of focusing on the tech and even though that's the cool stuff in data. Like, I



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mean, maybe I'm summing you up wrong, but is that kind of what you're saying?

0:53:47 Akins Lawal

No, that's pretty much it, Scott. Like, people, I'll say it again, people, process, tools. People first, because we are humans. We are people that are using this data and the systems that the data run through. So at the end of the day it's always to do some sort of action that's related to us. I think focusing on that is super important. And like there's so many ways to kind of flip it, look at it but it always comes back to what did so and so think or how is so and so. So that's what you always come back to.

0:54:29 Scott Hirleman

That's being pragmatic and it's being like, hey... But I mean, I think data people focus on the tools because that's so much more tangible. And Danilo Sato at the end of the episode he did with Andrew Harmel-Law, he was like, "If I've got one thing, just talk to each other. Please just talk to each other." Like it...

0:54:51 Akins Lawal

Yes. Just talk to each other, that's like 75%, 80% of your problems. People have problems. I always used to say I can't solve people problems. That would be like my thing. It's like we can solve all these tech problems, we can solve these data issues, it's a relational thing. Oh, let's normalize this data, we'll figure it out. But I can't solve people problems. Like I'm not a... And so like as a data professional, I think, and even people within the organization, you tapped in on it, you got to have soft skills, you got to figure out like what it is that folks like and how to get along with them because that's like 80% of what you're gonna be dealing with.

0:55:37 Scott Hirleman

And tying it into what matters to them, tying it into their personal, like what part of the business strategy are they supporting, all of that. So, well I know we went even past, way past where we were trying to land just because of all the fun technical issues. But is there anything that we didn't cover that you'd like to or any way that you'd like to kind of wrap up what we've been talking about here?

0:56:01 Akins Lawal

No, I mean, I think we covered a lot today. I know we didn't get into as much... This was more I would say a philosophical conversation. I mean, we didn't delve deep into like implementation and such, but one thing I do wanna say is, and I'm hoping folks can get it out of just the conversation is this type of data culture that we're talking about, thinking about data from a people perspective, it can be done at any organization, and at any level or any size organization. So I think just intrinsically thinking about your people first, your why, 'cause businesses have their mission and then start to think about, "Okay, what does that mean from an information and data perspective?"



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Because that piece, like I think you mentioned it, it's like we do things, how does this data help me do better, right? So like, how does this data help me align to like the mission? So thinking about it from that perspective I think is something that I want folks to take away from this. You can do it at any level, it doesn't matter what size your organization is. It could be a two person operation, can even be one person operation, yes, you're gonna... The data lives in your head, right? The knowledge is in your head, but you're using it. So figuring out ways that you know you can become more of a, and you're doing it, I think you mentioned you're doing it naturally already through the relationships that you have. So I think that's the last thing I'll say today about that.

0:57:46 Scott Hirleman

Well, yeah, I mean, this has been... I think you just keep making good points that people in data don't talk about enough. And I think your perspective on it is slightly different than what I've heard because I think it's so much about like, hey, so a little bit of that slow down to speed up, but also just like, "Hey, I know you wanna do this at scale, but a lot of this is getting to scale by having people do one-to-one conversations." You don't have to have you to every single one, but you've got to train people on having that one-to-one network because that's really the only thing that's gonna be having each other's backs. Like, when you think about that kind of group strategy of, where one person can't shove the bus, but you get 50 people together that are all pushing on the same thing and it's just moving really quickly and easily 'cause you get that momentum together. So, I'm sure there's gonna be...

0:58:46 Akins Lawal

It's a team game.

0:58:47 Scott Hirleman

Yeah, exactly. I'm sure there's gonna be a ton of people that would love to follow up with you, kind of where's the best place to do that? Is there anything specific you'd like people following?

0:58:56 Akins Lawal

Yeah. I mean, anybody who wants to reach out, I'm on LinkedIn, so I've got all my information out there. I also have a company called Schema for Success where I kind of walk people through what it means to kind of get to the next level as it relates to their data related or their data management governance careers. And so I also do coaching. So it's like, hey, let's, if you really wanna talk through what that means, I'm more than happy to talk and I'm also just happy to talk and grab coffee for anybody who wants to reach out and talk to me on that as well. So Schema for Success and on LinkedIn are probably the two places you can find me.



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0:59:47 Scott Hirleman

Awesome. Well, and I know you do some photography and all sorts of other cool stuff.

0:59:52 Akins Lawal

Yeah. I do all sorts of stuff. I do photography, if you need... If you're a local and you need any photos, I can do that for you as well. I do a bunch of stuff, like, yeah. Like I said, when we started I was like, I'm a data strategist, knowledge manager and creator. So I like to create, I think it's important. So kinda gives me a little balance.

1:00:14 Scott Hirleman

Exactly. So, well, again, thank you so much, Akins, for all the time that you spent here with me today and despite all the fun technology issues and as well, thank you everyone out there for listening. I'd again like to thank my guest today, Akins Lawal, a Data Strategist at Schema for Success. You can find a link to his LinkedIn as well as the website for Schema for Success in the show notes as per usual. Thank you.

Hopefully, that interview episode was really useful for you. Please do consider getting in touch with guests from the show from these episodes. Most have said they'd really love people to reach out to them and please as well, if you've got a minute, rate and review the podcast somewhere. It really is honestly super helpful for other people looking into kind of data podcast to kinda get this in front of them. Data Mesh Radio is again, provided as a free community resource by Data Mesh Understanding. It's produced and hosted by me, Scott Hirleman. In April of 2023, I left DataStax who were wonderful in getting the data mesh community stuff started, so give them a shout for streaming and real time AI needs, but I left to start my own industry analyst kind of Information As A Service Firm. Our offerings are affordable, and you can do them on a one off or a month to month basis, throw it on the credit card, don't worry about going through purchasing and things like that. The services include lots of practitioner roundtables, one on one data mesh planning or feedback sessions and tailored introductions to other data mesh practitioners that are focused around your topics of interest, what are you actually running into challenges with.

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