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## **Data Mesh Radio Episode #106: Building an Effective Data Strategy: Why oh Why Don't You Start with the Why**

Interview with Liz Henderson

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### **Scott Hirleman**

The following is a message from George Trujillo, a data strategist at DataStax. As a reminder, DataStax is the only financial sponsor of Data Mesh Radio, in the Data Mesh Learning Community at this time. I work with George and I would highly recommend speaking with him, it's always a fun conversation.

### **George Trujillo**

One of the key value propositions of data mesh is empowering lines of business to innovate with data. So it's been really exciting for me personally, to see data mesh in practice and how it's maturing. This is a significant organizational transformation, so it must be well understood. Empowering developers, analysts, and data scientists with downstream data has been part of my personal data journey that reemphasized the importance of reducing complexity in real-time data ecosystems, and the criticality of picking the right real time data technology stack. I'm always open and welcome the opportunity to share experiences and ideas around executing a data mesh strategy. Feel free to email or connect with me on LinkedIn if you'd like to talk about real time data ecosystems, data management strategies, or data mesh. My contact information can be found in the notes below. Thank you.

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### **Scott Hirleman**

A written transcript of this episode is provided by Starburst. For more information, you can see the show notes.

### **Adrian Estala, Starburst**

Welcome to Data Mesh Radio, with your host, Scott Hirleman, sponsored by Starburst. This is Adrian Estala, VP of Data Mesh Consulting Services at Starburst and host of Data Mesh TV. Starburst is the leading sponsor for Trino, the open source project, and Zhamak's Data Mesh book, [Delivering Data Driven Value At Scale](#). To claim your free book, head over to [starburst.io](https://starburst.io).



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## Scott Hirleman

Data Mesh Radio is provided as a free community resource from DataStax. Welcome to Data Mesh Radio, produced and hosted by Scott Hirleman, the founder of the Data Mesh learning community. Data Mesh Radio is a vendor independent resource for learning more about Data Mesh. Let's jump in.

Bottom line up front, what are you going to hear about and learn about in this episode? I interviewed Liz Henderson, AKA the Data Queen, who is an Executive Advisor at Capgemini. To be clear though, Liz was only representing her own views on the podcast, so some high level takeaways/thoughts from Liz's point of view. Number one, to drive buy-in and engagement in a data strategy, especially with people outside the IT/Data team, focus on the why. Why are you doing this initiative or approach? What business goals is it supporting? Number two, also on driving buyin for a data initiative, start by listening instead of selling or pitching, focus on the business needs and work backwards to show how data can help address those needs.

Number three, to be successful with a large change management data initiative, you need the patience, leadership, courage and will to push forward and the budget, don't forget the budget. Number four, you can't have an effective data strategy if it isn't directly tied into the business strategy. Really consider how data can help to support and execute on the business strategy. Data strategy in a vacuum away from the business is a recipe for trouble at best. Number five, it's very easy to get overly focused in data on what you are delivering instead of why you are delivering it and who it is supposed to serve, if you want to be successful, you need to focus on the latter two and look to to deliver continuous incremental value rather than a backend loaded value delivery. Number six, change management is very easy to get wrong in data. Really consider if you can not only get the ball rolling, but keep it rolling and keep it rolling in the right direction to implement a large change. Loss of momentum, loss of direction can mean loss of funding.

Number seven, if Data Mesh follows a similar pattern to data literacy, it's likely to be three to four years from the initial large swell and hype around Data Mesh, whether that was late 2021 or more, kind of now, it's gonna take that three to four years until we really see a clear picture of how more organizations have really implemented. There needs to be a time for trial and error and settling in and really figuring out what practices are some good approaches. That's part of what I'm trying to do with the podcast is figure out that stuff earlier, but kind of naturally, we shouldn't expect it to be quite so quick. Number eight, data literacy can only get you so far, you need data storytelling and visualization as the business people need to be able to understand what the data is saying to drive their decisions. When we talk about data



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informed or data driven, people actually have to understand what the information is telling them not just have access to that information. Finally, number nine, the three most common ways organizations go wrong with data are first, technology first/expecting to buy your way to a solution to your challenges, second, not asking the why questions. Why are we doing this? Why are we approaching it this way? And finally, not having a data strategy at all. With that bottom line up front done, let's jump into the interview.

Okay, very, very excited for today's episode. I have the Data Queen, Liz Henderson here, who is an Executive Advisor at Capgemini. I wanna be clear that she is representing only her own opinions today and not officially speaking on behalf of the company as well. So we're gonna be covering a lot of different ground here today, but a lot of this is when you're thinking about something like Data Mesh this is the conversation that you wanna be having with the leaders in your data organization and maybe with the rest of the C Suite about like, why are we actually trying to do this? Getting to the why, what are the strategic goals? Like Data Mesh isn't the point. Data Mesh is the vehicle that we're trying to do to implement a data strategy. Is Data Mesh or anything else, evaluating is it right for you? Is it right for you right now?

And it's okay if it's not. I keep telling people, Data Mesh might not be the right fit for them right now, and that's not a bad thing. We need to get to that level of thinking. And I think Liz has a very pragmatic thought process to the way that we do data and that it's not this big bang, okay, hard shift type approach, how do we kind of do that evolution heading towards a revolution, but that we're not trying to do an overnight revolution type of impact to our data organization, 'cause we have to keep the lights on, we have to keep things going. So very excited to kinda jump into a lot of those things. Liz let's have some great experience, especially being the Queen of Data. If you don't mind, if you could give people a bit of an introduction to yourself and a bit about your background, then we can jump into the conversation at hand.

### **Liz Henderson**

Fantastic intro thanks, Scott. So I've had a long career in data, both in consulting and directly in industry roles. I've got a proven track record for leading and shaping data strategy, which means helping organizations really understand the value of their data and what they can generate value wise from that data and treat it as an asset. Look after it just like you look after your people.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah, well, and it's always funny with the whole data as an asset versus data as a product conversation, and we can get into that a little bit later, but to me it's when you think of data assets as assets instead of data assets as products, but data should be considered of value, so it is an asset versus like, "Okay, this thing can't change."



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Which is the way that we've always kind of approached data of we have to get it right up front, and if we don't get it right, then it starts to devolve and all of that thing, so I'd love to wrap that into the conversation as well, but why don't we start with the importance of the why of getting to why. Why are we trying to do this? What are the strategic goals when you're having that conversation with people about data, let's start with the people outside of the data org. I know a lot of people that are trying to push Data Mesh inside their organization or data strategy, how do you think about pushing that up to a higher level of conversation, not like we're doing Data Mesh and that's the thing that solves it. No, it doesn't solve anything if you're just doing Data Mesh.

What are the traditional roadblocks in that conversation? What are you seeing? What have you seen historically, and what do you see now about having that conversation? I think people are bought in, in general, that data is important, but there's not really a data is valuable data is important, therefore X right? So can you help us bridge that gap and start to talk about some of the conversations you've had historically, and how those have evolved more recently around getting to an actual valuable output instead of trying to push information at people like actually generating that real back and forth conversation.

### **Liz Henderson**

Yeah, it's a really good question. And that's a lot of the challenge. People grab hold of those buzz words. I want a data catalog, we need Data Mesh. But what does that actually mean? And you can spend lots and lots of money, IT often comes to us and says, "We want Data Mesh." Okay, but why? Why are you as IT wanting Data Mesh, it needs to be driven from the business, and unless the business is owning that, they are managing the data, they really understand the why and what that product you're developing. And I don't just mean Data Mesh products, I mean a data catalog, a data product, your master data management, unless that really is understood and how that enables the business strategy to achieve those objectives that the business sets out every year to say, "This is what we are going to achieve this year." What are the enablers, at what point is data beneficial to helping the organization move forward for achieving those objectives? And that's a lot of the challenge.

People don't think about the why, they just say, "Yeah, we want Data Mesh." Okay, but what are you gonna do with it? If you create a Data Mesh, you create products, you create a couple of products, you've got a couple of use cases, now what? What happens, are you actually going to maintain that data, who's gonna own it, are you just gonna stick it on a shelf like a book and just hope somebody looks at it, where does that take you? What does that actually help you generate value in the business, how does it impact your customers and all those things, it's a really big picture, and I think a lot of organizations just focus on that tiny slice of this is the great buzz word.



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If we take the Data Catalog challenge, yes, we need Data Catalog, but what are you gonna do with that? You've got a data catalog, you've got a list of all your data assets, your data sources, so what? How are you gonna use them? What you're gonna do with them doesn't improve the quality just because you've got a data catalog, so you can't get any more value or any formal benefit out of them just because you have a data catalog. So really think about, why do I need that? What's value creation? How's that gonna help the organization?

### **Scott Hirleman**

And to put it a little bit crassly, I would say that kind of what you're saying is just, so what? Okay, what is the point? What do you think about that conversation? Do you let the business say, "So what?" Or what have you seen that's been successful and maybe unsuccessful when you're talking about driving these initiatives where it is, you need to really set yourself up in the data organization to drive those business objectives, those business strategies and constantly be tied into those, you're not in your own separate world doing your data and that the business is its own separate world, we have to really integrate those and tie those in to fit the real business strategy.

So what have you seen that's kind of been a bad path of how you would approach it and maybe some good ways? Because again, so many people are, they might have even a C level CDO types sponsor for their data initiative, but they still are struggling to really explain that, so what, what is the impact of this? And again, Data Mesh is early enough that we don't have a lot of, okay, and it's going to drive revenue in this way, and it's going to do it this way, and so how have you found those conversations, not exclusively to Data Mesh, but have you found those conversations to go well or let's start with poorly, so people can avoid the antipatterns and then maybe head down some good ways that you've seen people actually work with that.

### **Liz Henderson**

Well it's the same with anything if you say, I want to do data quality. Okay, why? A good example is data governance. We want to do data governance. Question one, what does that actually mean? But you get head long buying a solution, trying to write these policies, trying to set up enormous committees. Let's have these committees that we can have 20 people attend, we're gonna go through all this agenda, two months down the line, they're not successful because people can't see the value in attending them. You might get the first couple of months, you get everybody attending or what's this all about? But if they're gonna sit there for two hours and just listen to somebody preach at them saying, "You must do this, you must do that," why are they gonna attend? You really have to make it valuable for people to want to do this. So that goes back to the why.



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And if anybody asks for anything, it's almost as if someone comes to you and says, in your analytics role, "I need a report that says X, Y, Z." You just go ahead and do it. But actually, why are you doing it? You might have to repeat that report many, many times, and that person might just take that report and just put it in their drawer, just in case somebody asks them for it, that's why they're asking for it and that's why they need it. But is that really valuing your time to create that report and pull all the effort into it? So I think anything in the data world is, why do you need that? Where's the value? Who is getting the value? Is it internal value? Is it an external customer value? Really thinking about that. Look, I've often heard it called the Five Why's of Data. It's like a 2 year old. Why are we doing this? Why do you need it? I mean obviously don't sound like a 2 year old 'cause it might just annoy a few people, but think about how you get to the actual point?

I wrote a blog post recently about generating value out of data and what I did is I took a few examples, say for example, logistics, when you are putting products on the lorry, all the products don't fit in because the measurements are not right. Okay, so what do you need? So you work back from the problem, and that's the why are we doing this? And take the steps back, right back into the data elements of, "Okay, we need to sort this bit of data out, and these products are our highest selling products, let's sort those out." It's always working backwards, the actual root cause analysis.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah, and I think that attempting to solve those business solutions helps to engender actual buy-in in the conversation, 'cause you're going to them and saying, what are your problems? And let's figure out how we can actually support that with data, and then it's not I have a solution for you. This is kind of what I've seen with data virtualization. Data virtualization vendors are always a hammer looking for nails versus okay, I understand that this is a nail and this is a screw. You have to hit it very, very flush and it doesn't need a lot of pressure, so I'm gonna use a different type of hammering approach or a different hammer even to hit this in, or I'm gonna use a Phillips head or a flathead screwdriver, or all of those things because it is like, what are we actually trying to accomplish here? And then you can work back from that and as somebody who's been embedded in different roles and really focused on the business aspect, I totally agree. The more that you focus on like, why, why does this matter? And communicating that to all stakeholders.

So if somebody is really bought in that they wanna do Data Mesh we'll jump into, is Data Mesh right for you and evaluate that in a second, but let's say somebody really thinks that they're a data leader and they really think that Data Mesh is a good approach for the company. Every organization is different, and so we can give the blanket, it depends, but how can they start to have those conversations to drive buyin, is it to extract the pain points or is it to talk to sell the vision or how do you





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think that works best when we think this is the right approach for us in the data org, and we wanna take it to a broader level?

### **Liz Henderson**

Well, considering Data Meshes organization focused on forget technology. Anybody that talks about technology when they're talking about Data Mesh, is completely off track. Data fabric is technology. Let's keep the Data Mesh the focus of the organization. We can do Data Mesh with the technology we have now, so completely forget about technology. Getting the buy-in for Data Mesh is not saying to the business, "We're gonna do Data Mesh." It's understanding what the business needs and helping them solve their problems.

So if they're trying to do analytics or they want more insight, say for example, "It'd be great if we had all the customers in the Northeast who are coming to the end of their contract in the next six months." It's not only, "Yes, let's do some analytics." Think about it in the Data Mesh approach of, what kind of data products do we need to put together to develop that information so they have it on a regular basis, and also then can add on to it and develop more things and potentially add services and offerings to those customers and create some value out of it. So it may be that we understand those customers that have come into the end of a contract, and we might offer them new things or we might offer them new services and help your teams understand the benefits by looking at what they need to achieve. So they might have sales figures, they might have retention figures, and it's about taking those elements and focusing on those and saying, "We have a solution, and we might try something that will help you achieve that." Not saying, "Here's Data Mesh, that will give you the world." 'Cause it won't.

### **Scott Hirleman**

And it's funny, there's a couple of different things emerging from Data Mesh as to what is the genesis of data products? Is it that the domain... I think Zhamak's original vision was that the domain would know pretty well about how they want to share their data, and then people would start to consume from that. But what I'm seeing, the conversations I'm having is, if the domain is kind of in a vacuum relative to what people are really directly requesting and they're creating these data products with the assumption that people will consume from them, people aren't consuming from them. Part of that is that the data discovery tooling and the way that we do it is not as robust as we need, but it's also just, I think, exactly what you're talking about. I think we just need to drive to pain points. There's some people that are creating almost purposeful data swamps, it's that this is not the highest quality data, but it is, what data could be on offer? And then use cases emerge. But where we're seeing people really seeing good benefits early from Data Mesh, it's that there is a use case driven data product creation, whatever that means, that we really do



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focus on the, but why? Let's not do work for the sake of doing work.

If you're sharing data that nobody's finding valuable, and you've talked to the people that might find it valuable and they don't find it valuable, don't do that work anymore. Which we haven't had as an approach in data of, "Hey, this thing's not very valuable, let's shut it off." That's not something that's been in. I feel like this thing that you're creating has to be served in perpetuity, and that's kind of that asset mindset versus the product mindset of, "Hey, we sunset products. They're not there anymore." I go to Trader Joe's as my grocery store, and they keep sunsetting the products I like, so I'm not really happy about that, but maybe it's not the highest margin or maybe it's not the greatest demand. I think that's an important aspect of it. I did wanna talk about is Data Mesh right for you, or any other strategy right for you? Is it right for you right now? How do you think about answering that question? You're an executive advisor, so you have executives coming to you and saying, "We wanna do Data Mesh" What's your first reaction and then how do you talk them either through it or off the ledge as to, "Well, you're not really ready for this." But how do you think about that conversation internally for organizations of, how can they really evaluate if this is something that's gonna be useful or helpful for them?

### **Liz Henderson**

Yeah, I just think about different customers, different things and all the scenarios that come to me and it's kind of like, yeah, maybe not for you. Maybe a little bit for you. Just going back on another comment that you just said about creating Data Mesh, you've got to be really careful 'cause you can end up creating that white elephant, huge investment. White elephant sits in the corner, nobody ever uses it. And we're really familiar with that spreadsheet culture; everybody loves their spreadsheets. And if you're not changing the organization sufficiently well that people no longer use the spreadsheets, again, you're spending an awful lot of money on Data Mesh, creating data products, and it's not gonna be cheap to reorganize the business to move in this direction just for people to continue using their spreadsheets. So a couple of examples: I've had one company come to me and say, "We want to do Data Mesh" But actually as you talk to them, they don't even have the understanding within the business of what Data Mesh is. It's the IT team that is focusing, "We wanna do this, we are pushing this." The business is not engaged in any way whatsoever, so how on earth are you ever going to get the business buying into this?

And to help them understand that IT lives to run data, I don't know why. It's that control and command. I think it's like, "You do not own data, it has to be owned by the business." And that's one of my passions around Data Mesh, because it forces that ownership into the business. It takes it out of the grubby little hands of IT and puts it in the hands of the business who really understand the data, they understand





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what they want to do with it. And if they don't understand now, they just need to go on that journey to help them understand what the data is, what it's used for, how it could be better, how it can enable better exciting opportunities. That leads into data literacy, which we'll pick up a little bit later. But yeah, there's that kind of, "Okay, really? Well, do you wanna do this if you're not engaging with the business, do you not think we should be talking to the business and asking them and helping them understand it?" And for me, in any plan around that, you really have got to do a lot of work on the change management, bringing the business on board and helping them understand, and that's not gonna be quick and it's not gonna be easy.

No disrespect to the business, but they have a different approach to what they do, so this is a completely different way of working. And then you've got other organizations that say, "Yeah, we have got a federated organization, we're really wanting to do Data Mesh. We're gonna start off by putting all our data in one place." Well, it's kinda not Data Mesh. So if you're not focusing on the reorganization to become federated, 'cause actually in reality, you're completely decentralized, you've got no central governance around your data, it's like, "Are you sure you want to be looking at this approach just at this time? There might be better solutions out there for you." And it's a really challenging conversation, 'cause like I said, they just grab onto this, "Everybody's doing Data Mesh let's all do it." And they think it's the right thing to do, but I think there's so many challenges out there. I wrote recently about the benefits, the considerations, and the negative side of it. If you invest all this money and don't get anything for it, where are you?

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah. Why are you investing? What are you trying to do? I think exactly what you talked about, there is a story of DPG Media. One is Rossier, who was one of the first guests on the podcast, talked about how they were in such a kind of disorganized decentralized structure that they did have to bring everything together to then redecentralize because they needed to develop those practices of. What are our practices around what we need for centralized governance? When people talk about federated governance in Data Mesh, it's about distributing the decision making to the people who understand the information and can make those decisions when it's not high risk decisions very, very quickly. And if it's high risk or highly complex decisions, that's where you have that centralized team to kind of lean back on.

But they were in such a disorganized state that they had to centralize themselves enough to create practices and actually understand what they were doing to then decentralize, but yeah, people are like, "Well, we're already decentralized, so let's go ahead and just do that." And it's like, but you don't have any ways of working, so every team thinks that their way of working is the right way. You're not doing Data Mesh right now if you're gonna be moving to that centralization, you could be preparing



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yourself. And that's fine, but again, it's this thing of, "Well, we wanna jump to the end." It's like, okay, say I wanna run a marathon. I can't just start by going out there and saying, "Okay, I'm gonna run 10 miles tomorrow." I've got messed up shins, I haven't run in years and years. I ran a couple of blocks with my dog and that's about it. But you kinda have to set that out and that you can't jump to the end vision, 'cause you're just gonna create more chaos and mess for yourself.

### **Liz Henderson**

Yeah, and Data Mesh is not a silver bullet, nothing's a silver bullet. Being successful with data takes a lot of hard work. I also say a fair amount of money, although you should actually be looking to be cost neutral. But we can cover that later. Patience is also another big thing. And leadership is so important. Leadership from the top, so you're being consistent in the way you do things. I do talk to other organizations and they say, "Oh yeah, we're gonna do data management and data governance and actually, let's create a data strategy in this small area of the business." And then another part of the business comes and says, "Let's create a data strategy in this area of the business," and it's like, "Guys, you're kinda duplicating everything. You're spending twice as much money, just do it from the top, take the leadership, give the direction and make that consistent across the organization and then help each of the departments out with their own needs, but at least you are moving in the same direction for the same need to develop and achieve the business strategy."

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah, I think that it's funny how when I'm talking to organizations, and I'm guessing you're finding the same thing of, how many pockets of strategy there are of why aren't people communicating with each other. Like why isn't there a grander vision of, what are we actually trying to accomplish? I managed AWS costs for a public company, cloud spend for a company, and I was talking with so many different engineers and they kept being like, "Why does this matter? Why does this matter?" And it was like, well, because our costs were spiraling. It was when we first launched a SaaS thing, so you're gonna have a lot of initial spend. But our costs were going up 20%, 30% a month. When you compound that pretty aggressively, even when you start to say, "Okay, we're at launch, we're gonna now only be up 10% or 15% a month," your growth is just crazy at that level where you're more than doubling or probably tripling I think, if you really were to put the math together every year. That's not sustainable, that's a bad thing. So having that conversation being like, hey, we need to think about costs in everything we do, but it's not the most important.

Time to market matters, that we have to keep an eye on this and we have to embed it in every conversation, just so that we don't let it just slip by the wayside. And I think that's kind of what you're saying as well, like, hey, we need that broader vision, we need to have that conversation, we need to be thinking about this. But doing Data



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Mesh isn't the strategy, it's not even the data strategy, it's part of, what are we trying to achieve? Are we trying to be data driven? Okay, but why? You talked about the why. Okay, What does infusing data into more of our decisions on a day-to-day basis, what does that get us? Okay, it means that we can be more agile relative to lower case agile. But we can be more agile relative to questions and decisions, and as things come up in the market, we can react to opportunity. So I think that's exactly what you're saying. It's just you're preaching to the choir of somebody who really cares about the business side more than the data side, on my side. So if you got anything that you want to add on there, but I've got a couple questions that we could jump into that I wanna ask as well.

### **Liz Henderson**

Yeah, I think just a final point is Data Mesh is an enabler, and I think that's the thing to take away. It just enables other things to be successful or to happen or to give the opportunities to people to do new, exciting things.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah, I think that's a really good phrasing of it, is that everything? I talk about, "Don't be data driven, be data informed 'cause the data doesn't drive the decision." And so it is that enabler, it's enabling your people, and that's how you can also drive buy-in. We're not replacing you with data, we're enabling you, we're informing your decisions so you can move with better speed and accuracy and understanding and all of that. So a couple of different things that we could jump into. One would be, data products versus data as a product and how different that is. Or another would be, I think that could be really interesting is, how long it takes for people to really understand how to do certain things within the data space. We talked in our precall about data literacy and data culture, and people were talking about that three to four years ago. And then people have really started to kind of figure out what it is and how to do that. And I think people are not being that patient around Data Mesh, they're trying to move very, very quickly with it. And I'm trying to be supportive of extracting as much information so people can move quickly, but with thoughtfulness. Which one of those is more interesting for you to dive into first: the data as the product versus data products or how it takes time for approaches and trends and things like that in data to actually sink in to figure out how to do them even somewhat well?

### **Liz Henderson**

Let's go with the time thing because that's really interesting because three or four years ago, every conference. I was gonna say webinar, but there were less webinars three or four years ago. Every conference, every panel you sit on the questions were, "How do we build a data culture, how do we do data literacy?" And it's taken up until very recently that data literacy is the new black. It's really popular. It's really fashionable. It's everywhere. You look at LinkedIn, and I don't think you can go past



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more than two or three posts without seeing somebody offering you a data literacy program or how to do data electricity really well, or what can you do with data literacy? It just literally is everywhere, and I accept that Data Mesh is pretty much everywhere. But what I would say is that it's taken that long for data literacy to become really embedded in data strategies and really key in some organizations.

And I still say, "Some" because actually not every organization is still understanding data literacy. They think about, "Well, we've got poor adoption of our new systems," but they don't think about the people because they go ahead, implement a new solution, "There you are. Magic. You've got a new system. Everything's solved." But you forget about the people. For me, doing anything with data... So for data success, you need your people, your process and technology. I think that's really common. Well, what you need to think about is the proportions of each. And I would say your people are at least 50% of that success, maybe even 80% of that success. Unless you support your people in changing their ways of work, in their beliefs, their approaches, even their skills, you're not gonna be successful with data. And that's probably a bit controversial because there's probably a lot of people that are successful, but I just think people are so important in the whole data space. For me, data is a people sport, full stop.

### **Scott Hirleman**

It's funny, 'cause I think the people that are successful that aren't focusing on the people, are successful in spite of it. Because it's like if okay, you lucked into that success almost, or you had that will to push so, so hard, or you had the money often more, to push so, so hard to overcome not doing the people aspect. Immanuel Schweizer from EMD electronics, in his episode talked about, they're now taking people out for 10 weeks and training them. And really like, how are we going to do data, why does this matter, here is how you actually understand the systems. And everybody is so excited and they're also starting to tell other people, "Hey, come join us because you're gonna actually learn how to do it. Everyone keeps telling you, you need to be data driven, you need to be. You need to really understand how to use data, but no organizations are really giving you the time to go and learn that." So, I think when I talk about Data Mesh, I say it's people process first, architecture second, technology 17th. And that really angers a lot of people because the tangible aspect is the technology, I think.

What have you seen that's worked around getting people up to speed on things? Because every organization is so different, are there any bed rocks when people are thinking about how do we actually get our people. Is it, "Okay, we're gonna train the consumers, the producers." That we're gonna train them all together? Are we gonna focus on specific use cases versus generalized skills? What have you seen that's worked? The other point that I wanted to bring into that as well was, when you look



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at why data projects fail. It's like 80% of the time it was bad communication and people didn't have the real needs and the wants and everything down pat, and so there was just this miscommunication. So even the communication aspect of it is so crucial, and that's again, the people's side of exchanging the context. It's not the API data exchange context, it's the people. So, how have you seen people doing that the right way or the wrong way so people can avoid certain aspects of it?

### **Liz Henderson**

Yeah, I mean, often it's the, "Well, we didn't understand the requirements." Or, "You didn't collect our requirements." Again, you're not talking to the right people. Just wanna challenge you on your technology 17th, that upsets me a little bit as well. And I'll tell you the reason why. It's because these days with technology that's AI led, it supports the users. So if you think about profiling and data quality and supporting those data stewards, yes, they need to understand data, and why they are doing it, and why it's important. But that good quality technology solution really will support the consistency. So instead of them typing in a ton of data quality rules, the system comes up with them and makes suggestions.

I did a presentation a couple of years ago about Norma and Ted. Ted walks into the office, "Norma, what's the updates today?" And it's like this virtual reality voice that comes on and says 'cause it recognized Ted's voice and just said, "You have five data quality issues. Three of them I've been able to resolve myself, two of them you need to look at." So, It's kind of almost like a virtual dashboard. When you walk in the office, you know what's going on because you've got that assistant in the technology that's able to understand and look after the data for you, because they have that artificial intelligence. Now, obviously that's not gonna happen tomorrow, but maybe the future is gonna look like that, I don't know.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah, my point to it is, again, getting the strategy bedrock down and that the specific technology pieces aren't the thing that drives it. It's not that you're choosing, "Okay, Kafka or Pulsar or Kinesis or whatever." That it's not, okay you're choosing these specific technologies. The more that I talk to people who are being successful, they go, "Technology is the hard part. Except for it's the hard part, but it's the easiest part of the hard part." Everything else is harder. Technology is difficult and we need it to support these things, but we must think about what we are trying to accomplish. What, the people process side, if we just throw technology at these challenges, that's the way we maybe architecture, that's the way that we've been trying to do data, and it hasn't scaled, so we need to rethink throwing technology first. Instead of saying, what do we actually want. This is the set up we want, and then we'll find the things that can support that or maybe even the stuff that will support it in the future, and we have to go without for a bit.



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But yeah, I fully agree that if everybody has to build everything themselves or if everything. Automation, automation, automation, is the crucial aspect of getting Data Mesh right, because otherwise you're just doing. When you talk to people that have worked at these FANGtype companies, a lot of their solution is to throw bodies at approaches. Since they have a high enough return on investment, they can hire a data engineer for an obscene amount of money and still get a lot of value out of throwing them at the problems. That's not going to work for 99.9% of companies, you just don't have that high return on just throwing these versus the engineering or the automation. But, we have to figure out what we're trying to do first. So to circle back to the question about how long it takes for things to kind of sink in. What did you see that made it so that people who are being successful with data literacy and changing their data culture and things? What did they learn over those three to four years that people can start to think about how to keep an eye out for Data Mesh?

### **Liz Henderson**

That's a really good question 'cause I actually don't know what changed over those three or four years. I think it's possibly, nothing specific has changed. I think it's more of a maturity in the industry of needing to do different, greater, more exciting things, really understanding data as the enabler. And we need data literacy in building that culture, because the culture you want is the pull. You want people coming to you saying, "I wanna get involved in this." Or, "I've got a fantastic idea." You want that passion, that excitement, people really are engaged. And it's possible to get that, but it is giving people that base knowledge. We've talked about GDPR years ago, it's a very long time ago now, and they get their GDPR training. But what does that actually mean to them? So if you think about an awareness for everybody in the organization, and data literacy is not, "I'm going to turn everybody into a data scientist." God forbid. We take English at school, but we're not all gonna be English philosophers. So just because we take data literacy, doesn't mean we're all gonna be a data scientist. It might just mean you're a receptionist. When you lock the visitors as they come in, you make sure the details that you log are correct. You're a security guard, you're walking around the office, you see some paperwork on a desk, you know what to do with it, you know what you should and shouldn't do, and what considerations you need to make.

You're in the warehouse, you load the trucks, the stock doesn't fit on the lorry, you know exactly what to do, who to report it to, what to say, things to look out for. It's building that basic awareness for everybody, and then building that up across the organization. So for me, the next level would be the people that consume data because that's your next highest level. The consumers that see the reports, the data that they're using for entering into other systems. Then after that, you get the creators, your customer service team, when they key in their data. I've got a great





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example I was using yesterday, 'cause somebody asked me what my first job was, and I said, it was working at a building society, and had this pile of index cards. Very long time ago. And I had to literally key in the names and addresses into this, I don't know, green screen mainframe system, that's how it goes talking. I hadn't got a clue what data quality meant in those days, if I made a mistake, I didn't know what the impacts were. So it's helping your enterers, so customer service is a great example. When you've got a new customer ringing up, entering that information into the system, and really understanding the impacts, allowing them to take those extra few seconds when they enter each field to know if it's correct or why it's important to be correct.

Not just knowing they've got that target of 90 seconds to, and I'm making it up completely, I've got no idea what it should be, to enter that information. They need to have the value and the importance of why. Always back to the why. Final level is your specialist, your scientists. And actually, I wouldn't just include your scientists in there, your scientists, your engineers, your analysts. I would include people with a passion. So if someone's got a passion but they're not yet in the data world, take them up that ladder, give them the expertise, the skills. Because you never know what diamond you've got hiding in your business that could unveil lots of exciting things. I was launching some digital products a couple of years ago, and we were doing a bit of a road show around the UK, and we went to one of the business areas. And the ideas that came from the audience, just because you were sparking that idea of, "Oh, I wonder if." Or, "What if." So your people on the ground, they have the best ideas, help them understand and be curious, and have that confidence and the freedom to be curious and raise those new ideas.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Well, and I think that's important for data literacy is to be able to identify those next people that you're gonna pull into. For me, it's always been a little confusing how data people don't understand the business, 'cause my brain just innately has understood how business works. And so you can drop me in, in any organization, and I'm just like, "Oh, here is the business context, here's what's important to the business, here's why." It just flows through my brain. But exactly what you're talking about of a lot of people that talk about who are their best people in their specific data organization. It's somebody that they've pulled from the business side who really understands that business context, and we don't. So many people are looking to buy instead of build when it comes to data literate folks. We just don't have enough of them to go around. But I liked what you were saying especially about, again, playing back into when you're talking about data culture. You're talking about what's been the secret sauce of data literacy. I think it's pushing back to people, why are we doing this? I think that's the whole point of when you communicate about Data Mesh and kind of what I'm trying to do with this podcast and with the



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community stuff, to extract the information out.

Because, when I've seen other trends in data, things get really hot, but nobody really focuses on that. On two very, very important questions of why and how. And usually vendor-driven, so it's, "By using us." Versus like, "No, here are the actual approaches that people are taking." And not that this is the one approach but, "Let's get into the specifics." And I think that's kind of what you're talking about as well, with communicating why what we're doing matters, instead of, "I need you to do this." It's, "I need you to do this, and why." And I think that's almost a silly thing to say out loud to people like you and I, where we've been in those things where people are just doing things for the sake of doing them and you're like, "Why are we doing this?" But it's so important, it's so crucial, to drive that in every single conversation. Why are we doing this? Why does this matter? Again, when you ask that report. Somebody asks for a report, "Well, why are you having me create this?" And it's not a negative thing to be able. If your culture is so bad that people can't ask, "Why are we doing this?" Then, you've gotta fix that first.

So, no, I think you're circling back on the same points without meaning to because it's, again, the things that matter. It's what matters, and how are we going to approach this, communicate with each other? I think that's so crucial. I think one other thing that we had talked about was kind of inspiring people. When we talked in the pre show about inspiring people with data literacy and getting people to think about the art of the possible. What have you seen there? What have you seen that's been helpful, or is it somebody sharing very specific visions, is it finding, "Okay, this was an example of somebody seeing the art of the possible, and this is what the outcome was." How do you do that, and then how do you build in the time for people to actually spend the time to think about the art of the possible in their daytoday job?

### **Liz Henderson**

That goes back to having freedom. And yes, we're all very busy, but again, it's back to that confidence and that really helps them want to be curious about the data. So, customer services, they might have a lot of customers ringing up for a certain topic and they're just now thinking, "Well, if we could have the data for this, we could be proactive and send an email out, and advise all those customers of this. So we'll cut our inbound calls down so we can really focus on supporting customers who need it." So it's having that broader thought process and thinking of the wider organization. And just going back to that, getting data right the first time and spending that extra few moments for putting data in. Although I circle back to the why, there's a cost. There's a huge cost implication there. Because getting data right and spending those extra few seconds to make sure it's the right spelling of the name and the address, etcetera, is a lot more cost effective than the benchmark is between four



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and 10 times more. So if it takes a dollar to enter a name, you're looking at four to \$10 for every name you need to update 'cause it's not correct.

So for example, if you've got nine million, 20 million customers, that's an awful lot of data, if you take the average of 30% is incorrect. So there's huge cost savings by helping people understand why it's important to get the data right that first time. And I think just going back to that art is possible. Something I've seen a lot recently is storytelling and visualization. How you communicate to the business. So, we can talk to analytics, we can talk to IT, but we don't always talk the same language. And if there is that element of business partnership, business translator, or data translator, those type of roles that sit between the business and the IT or the analytics teams, they're the ones that create those amazing visualizations, or the stories that take the human element and how to really demonstrate the emotions and the challenges that person or that customer faces, and how we could really support them and bring a smile to their face. And I think there's a lot of just thinking about how you can support people with those different elements of the way we look at the world.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah. I think a couple of points in there that I wanted to highlight was, almost instill the confidence in people that are on the front line that their insights might mean something, and then create a way for that information to actually flow. This could be the art of the possible. Like, "If we have this, I might be able to do that." Somebody might say that to their manager and their manager would go, "Oh yeah, that would be great." Versus, there's a way to actually say, "Hey, can we do this?" And that it might spark an actual conversation to say, "Would this be valuable, and what would be the value? And let's figure out if we can do it." That somebody is empowered to do that, I think that's really important. And then again, what you said of, if we're just doing data work and we're driving all these amazing insights, but nobody can consume the insights. Why are you doing it? What is the point of this? I think that's so important. I think, again, you just keep circling back without meaning to the why, because it is the most important aspect of these conversations. When you think, you're clearly somebody who's focused on data strategy.

The more you talk to people on data strategy, it's like, "Why are we doing this? Why are we doing this?" Focus on the why, focus on the outcome, like this has to have a business outcome. If Data Mesh doesn't drive business outcomes, why do it? If anything doesn't drive business outcomes, and you don't wanna be overly only focused on the business of, "Well, we don't need to focus on our culture because that doesn't drive a business outcome." Yes, it does, it means that you have people that wanna work there and you have the long term and you don't wanna focus on the short versus the long and all that fun stuff, but like and creating an inclusive environment and all that stuff is so crucial for a lot of reasons, and it does help



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support the business, but it's also just being a good person, but yeah, so much of this has to be that. If you were to sum up where people go wrong, is it again, just like losing sight of that business outcome or what do you think is the thing, especially when people are thinking about Data Mesh, there's a lot of antipatterns we haven't uncovered yet.

There's a lot of potential land mines. We're heading for that trough of disillusionment of those people who charged forward instead of with intention and with what you said, like that leadership and that courage and the funding and everything to really do this right. Like where do you think are the potential pitfalls or the land mines that people haven't kind of touched yet, that if people were to listen to you, what would you tell them to avoid?

### **Liz Henderson**

Go into the top right hand corner of the Gartner Magic Quadrant, and pick a solution, a technology solution, without understanding, "What do you wanna do with that?" They go to the Magic Quadrant, they pick that righthand top item, and they go and buy it, they fall for all the sales spiel, that it can bake bread and create gold or whatever it can do. But what are they gonna do with that? And that goes back to what we said at the beginning about the processes. How are we going to use this? What's the challenge in the business? What are we trying to solve? What do we need to do with the people to help them use this effectively? That's one of the biggest mistakes I see again, with the why. Not asking the why question as well, so there's probably two elements there. Technology first approach, absolute no, no, which I think we've agreed on. Yeah, we wanna be data driven, but what does that actually mean? And not understanding what that actually means you're just darting off in a certain direction, and just going and trying to do something without actually planning. Oh, actually, there is a third one. Not having a data strategy, again, just doing these siloed activities without actually having that overarching strategy for the direction that they're going in.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Yeah, I think that's the point solution versus the overall solution like when you talked about those pockets. It's like if we're not doing things in a cohesive way, you're gonna have combative, and even when I talk about negotiation in Data Mesh, I use the phrase, I don't know if I came up with it, I'm sure I didn't, but collaborative negotiation. And that's where you go in and you say, "What are we trying to achieve?" We're going forward together. This is not about you versus me, this is us versus the world. What can we do together if we're moving together cohesively in that single direction? You're making a lot of the points that I've tried to make, and I even put out an episode about what is data. What are we trying to achieve with Data Mesh? So much of the stuff, Zhamak in her first presentations covered this a lot, but she's left it



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out more and more because she kind of has assumed people have absorbed it, but a lot of people haven't been like, "What are we trying to do with this?" This has to have a point. It's not just fun to do, to be data driven. What are we actually trying to achieve or trying to make it so that it's easier to infuse your business decisions with data? Inform your business decisions, whether that's the big or the small, and you figure out what's useful, is it.

Not every single decision needs to be data informed, right? Where are you gonna go for lunch today? You don't really need data information, maybe you do. Maybe you go to Yelp, maybe you do that. But like, okay, we're gonna do a team lunch. Maybe you wanna go out and do a little bit of something, but it's that's external data, not internal data, but if somebody's making a call to a prospect and you can give them 2X the amount of information that's useful in that call, and it leads to a 50, 60% higher conversion rate, that has a massive business impact, even if it's just a small thing about, "Hey, here are five trends about what we've seen, the customer's usage, if it's customer success or something like that, or for a prospect, it's like, "Hey, this is the industry the company is in, here are three use cases that we've done with that industry." You have those little quick little hooks that seem like they're very small, but they're super, super valuable versus like, "Okay, we need to drive our full strategy and we need to make these massive decisions." Yes, you obviously wanna do that with data. Sorry, I'm just talking to you, I'm preaching to the choir, 'cause you're saying the things that I really think people have missed sight of in a lot of the data strategy stuff.

### **Liz Henderson**

Yes, I completely agree. It just has to be business focused. Yeah, you're absolutely right. Many organizations miss that key point and trying to drive the need for data strategy is actually a really tough sell.

### **Scott Hirleman**

It's telling people to spend the time to think when people wanna. People are inherently intrinsically motivated to action, and so yeah. There's been a phenomenal conversation, I think, again, it's summed up a lot of the things that have been through lines for a lot of the episodes, and I think making them very explicit is very useful for folks. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you wanted to cover? I know we were hoping to cover adaptive governance and data as a product versus data products, but we're coming up on an hour here, but is there anything else we didn't cover or is there any way that you'd wanna kinda wrap up the episode, put a kind of button on anything?

### **Liz Henderson**

It's just thinking about the why. Just going and circling right back to the beginning. Why are you actually doing something? Why do you want to do something? Going



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back to the thinking, take time, maybe you don't have those strategies, but why do you wanna be data driven? Why do you wanna Data Mesh? What are the benefits you're actually gonna get from that? That's probably the strongest message that I would say out of that. Do the thinking before you dive in.

### **Scott Hirleman**

"But I wanna move, I wanna go now." Well, Liz this has been super awesome, if people want to follow up with you, where is the best place to do that, and what do you want them following up with you about?

### **Liz Henderson**

Yeah, feel free to contact me via LinkedIn, there's a ton of blogs on there, also replicated on my website for about nine years worth of effort, so feel free to message me about anything that spikes your interest in my blog posts.

### **Scott Hirleman**

Awesome, yeah, and we'll drop links to that stuff in the show notes as per usual, we'll make it easy on the guests to find that as well, so again, Liz, thank you so much for spending the time and sharing your insights on kind of again, focusing on, why are we doing this? This has to have a point though, you're just preaching to. It's almost like you're just telling me because it's just like, "This is the thing that I wish more people would say out loud," it's so important to say this out loud, so again, thank you so much for the time and thank you everyone as well for listening.

### **Liz Henderson**

Thanks Scott, it's been an absolute pleasure.

### **Scott Hirleman**

I'd again like to thank my guest today, Liz Henderson, AKA the Data Queen, who's an Executive Advisor at Capgemini, you can find a link to her website with her blog post and her LinkedIn in the show notes as per usual. Thank you.

Thanks everyone for listening to another great guest on the Data Mesh Learning Podcast. Thanks again to our sponsors, especially DataStax, who actually pays for me full time to help out the Data Mesh community, if you're looking for a scalable, extremely cost efficient multi data center, multi cloud database offering and/or an easy to scale data streaming offering, check DataStax out, there's a link in the show notes. If you wanna get in touch with me, there's links in the show notes to go ahead and reach out. I would love to hear more about what you're doing with Data Mesh and how I can be helpful. So please do reach out and let me know as well as if you'd like to be a guest, check out the show notes for more information. Thanks so much.