Data Mesh Radio Episode #303: Delivering What Matters - Value - Through Strong Business Collaboration
Interview with Saba Ishaq
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0:00:00 Scott Hirleman
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0:00:07 Starburst
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0:00:29 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. We're at over 200 episodes. I've 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.

Delivering What Matters - Value - Through Strong Business Collaboration. Bottom line up-front, what are you gonna hear about and learn about in this episode. I interviewed Saba Ishaq, CEO, and founder of her own data as a service consultancy Decide Data. She also provides third party data analytics as a service solution. So here are some key takeaways or thoughts from Saba's point of view. Number one "If you don't know what you want, you're going to end up with a lot of what you don't want." This is especially true in collaborating with business stakeholders when it comes to data. Number two, focus on delivering value through data. Instead of delivering data and assuming it has value, "not all data is created equal." Number three, as a data leader, it's your role to help people figure out what they actually want by asking great questions and being a strong partner when it comes to the data and data work. Don't only focus on the data work itself, but it's very easy to do data work for the sake of it instead of something that is actually valued.

Number four, to deliver data work that actually moves the needle. We need to start from what are the key business processes and then understand the pain points and opportunities. Then good data work is about how do we support and improve those business processes. Number five, relatedly that's also the best way to drive exec alignment, talking about their business processes and how they can be improved first, data work second, they will feel seen and heard and are far more likely to lean in. At the end of the day, addressing business and operational challenges is what data and analytics work is really all about, right? It's gotta come back to the business. It's not data work for the sake of data work. Number six, deliver something valuable early in any data collaboration with a business stakeholder. You don't have to deliver an entire completed project, but time to first insight is time to value, and you build momentum and credibility with that stakeholder. You just have to communicate about that of course.

Number seven, at the beginning of a project and delivering a data product is kind of itself a project. You can't really get too specific on those wordings. But at the beginning of a project, you should work with stakeholders to not just define target outcomes, but also define how you're going to collaborate and communicate. You can't just get requirements, go away and build. Working with data should be iterative and should have an element of continuous improvement to evolve what you deliver as you build value. Again, it's all about building to that value and not treating data work as if it's this kind of monolithic project that we are delivering instead of like the point of data work. Number eight, start any data work by asking someone about their business objectives, challenges, and target outcomes. You need your business stakeholders to have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. Otherwise, you are likely to be delivering only data work instead of business value that leverages your data. Number nine, by doing deep discovery work, you can find where are the key linchpins and value drivers in a use case, there are points of criticality that are easy to

lose in a sea of potential requirements that are really just requests. Find those crucial value leverage points.

Number 10, relatedly. You can use those value leverage points to keep your business execs engaged. They will hopefully see the importance and help you narrow in on what matters in their use case. Then it's no longer about the data work, but the value to them. Number 11, potentially controversial for data people. You have to balance career management and interesting project technology work versus value delivery, right? That doesn't mean delivering value isn't interesting, but it doesn't always mean getting to play with the latest and greatest technologies. But if data people never get to have fun and play with cool tech, many will just leave your organization. It's a tough balance. Try to make valuable work also interesting, easier said than done relatedly, try understanding the data teams learning areas of interest and see how you can build seeds to foster their skill growth while making data work valuable. Sometimes it turns out to be a win-win situation. Again, it's hard, but it's something to really focus on and keep in mind. Also, relatedly, be very transparent and communicate a lot to your data teams about what you are prioritizing in their work and why it's very easy to get lost in telling people to do certain work rather than why they are doing that work. Keeping your data people in the loop of the why will keep them focused on what matters.

Number 14, for many organizations, the rate of change of their technology both application and data technologies, but that rate of change of their technology is growing at a faster rate than the rate of their people change management and transformation process, right? You're just having this ever increasing rate of change of your technology. You need parallel streams to modernize both the technologies, but also your change management and transformation processes, or your people will fall further behind leading to chaos. Number 15, potentially controversial. Relatedly, your overall org and/or digital transformation strategy should be tied to your data strategy. Otherwise, they'll likely be headed in different directions creating more challenges. Scott note, Benny Benford has talked a lot about this in episode 244, Going Far Together. The reason it's controversial is most people aren't tying their digital transformation and especially org transformation to their data strategy. Or they're kind of doing that at the end instead of integrating those pretty close. Number 16, data management is a very crucial element of digital transformation, but it's not the same thing as change management. The data team shouldn't be the ones leading the overall digital transformation of the organization. That's too much on a team that specializes in data rather than a team that specializes in change management. If you are in that situation, it's a very tough spot to do it very well.

Number 17, it's very important to focus on communication to stakeholders. When you think about data governance and digital transformation, for many execs, these are

foreign topics, so you have to work hard to engage them and keep them leaning forward on the necessary work. Data governance is beneficial for everyone. So if explained and defined well, people will engage willingly after knowing what's in it for them. Now that can be controversial, it's not everybody will always lead in, but it's one where if people really get why you're doing it, you have a much greater chance of them engaging. Number 18, as someone in the data team, you have to be well informed about digital transformation initiatives inside your organization. Otherwise, you'll miss opportunities to align to those initiatives and have all your data sources break when there is a migration you weren't told about.

Number 19, it's easy to screw up the data steward ownership conversation. When you're trying to let someone know they're responsible for the governance of their data, it's often a scary conversation for both parties, but it's necessary and you can show people why it makes sense and add value to their work too. But just be cognizant that it's a fraught conversation. Number 20, relatedly link people's pain points to current weaknesses in the data governance. Show them they are causing issues for themselves and give them an easier path to fix it without having to learn everything about data work. Finally, number 21, data governance doesn't have to be some wholly or "holy" separate practice. It should be just part of normal work related to data. Make it less scary and more approachable for your business stakeholders. It's a team effort and it drives real measurable benefits. Okay, enough of just me, let's hear from our awesome guest in this interview episode.

Okay, very, very excited for today's episode. I've got Saba Ishaq here who's the CEO and founder of Decide Data, and we're gonna be talking about a lot of different things, but a lot of this, we're gonna be having a conversation around how do we actually have meaningful conversations about data with the non-software, the technical, the data people. Like how do we actually dig towards this whole thing of being data-driven is very frustrating because people think it's about the data instead of it's about the people and they're the ones that are making the decisions and doing the work. There's no like kind of treating data as a product without considering the data governance and the digital transformation. And we had a panel specifically on transformation and how does this all work and that we can, again, get too focused on the very specifics of the data work instead of what we're trying to do. And then where do we even start when it comes to delivering value through data? But before we get into that, Saba if you don't mind if you give people a bit of a introduction to yourself and then we can jump into the conversation at hand.

0:12:29 Saba Ishaq
Absolutely. Hi everyone, my name is Saba and I am the founder and CEO of Decide Data. It's a data consultancy company and we provide data DAaaS services, data analytics as a service. I am extremely passionate about data analytics, data

governance and data strategy. So, yeah.

0:12:53 Scott Hirleman
Well, and you even founded a company to help other companies do this, so I wanna jump into that conversation that we had a lot of fun in the pre-call about this, about how do we have meaningful conversations without getting so specific about, okay, are we gonna use Spark or are we gonna use Snowflake, or are we gonna use Flink or are we gonna use Kafka? Or are we gonna use 'em together? Like how do we integrate... I know all the fun technology names, but how do we think about having these conversations and have them be meaningful without getting so bogged down? Like how do you keep the conversation flowing? So it's not the data people only talking to the data people, especially if you've got a central data team and then it's just a central data team talking while there's a bunch of business people in the room. So I'd love to hear how you think about what are the things they care about, but also keeping that conversation aligned to what they care about.

0:13:56 Saba Ishaq
Yeah, I think that happens so often and that's one of the biggest things where those... Besides... It's like a great divide technical folks and the business folks, right? And so I think that it's very important to understand and go in with the perspective is that we have to understand what their objectives are. What are their challenges? What are their end-to-end objectives in their functions? And not until we are able to understand like what their world looks like, it's gonna be hard to really bridge that like communication or that engagement, and then everybody's gonna continue to be disconnected.

And I think that that's such a critical element or like a glue that like puts those groups together, it's like if you can understand just like in any relationship, right? Like if you really care about somebody or someone, right, that it means a lot or you wanna help, right? You wanna understand their world, you wanna understand where they're coming from and what does that look like. And so similarly, that's basically what we should be doing with business stakeholders, like understanding what their world looks like, making that extra effort to understand like what their processes are even. Even if it's not challenges, even if it's not business objectives or goals, but even their like processes. And I think because if we do that, we get their engagement as well throughout the process from the beginning.

0:15:40 Scott Hirleman
Yeah, I think Ghada Richani talked a lot about this as well, of like getting people to lean into the conversation and be like how do we keep somebody engaged? Because historically what we've done with data is gotten requirements gone and done our data stuff and come back and presented it as ta-da instead of something

that is like okay, we're gonna involve you in this process. It's almost like if you were to go on a couple of dates with someone and then they're like okay, I'm gonna come back six months later and I'm going to be your perfect partner, and that just doesn't work, right? That's not at all gonna be something that works for building a relationship and that when we think about delivering things as a product, we think about delivering things as continuous value, like that relationship aspect.

So I'd love to understand, can you give any examples of how somebody... So we've got a lot of data leaders out there that are listening. How can they go about fostering these conversations and how do we kind of prevent them from trying to be like I got them bought in in this one conversation, therefore they're perma bought in, versus continuously building up to figure out where that value is and to make it a even more complicated question. Can you talk a little bit in there about how far do we have to go to meet them? Some people say you gotta meet them in the middle, some people say you gotta meet them where they are. Do we have to learn everything about their business to get them to tell us about what's valuable for their business? Like how have you found, like how far you actually have to go into that and are you having to suggest the things to them of would this be a value versus having them tell you what's of value, and then you try and work backwards towards the data side? What have you found that works?

0:17:41 Saba Ishaq
Okay. Okay. That's a really, really good question. So I'll try to like break it apart a little bit piece by piece, right? So keeping them engaged it's not like a one time thing where you're just like Hey, we got them engaged at the beginning and then you don't do anything in the interim while you're developing their data product. And they don't hear from you, right? And so it's gonna be very important to keep business stakeholders engaged in every part of the way. And so how you really define your lifecycle and how you're gonna deliver to them, how you're gonna communicate, how are you going to collaborate? And if you set those standards or those processes of how you're gonna do that along the way, I think that really, really does help. So in my past experience, we have that initial stakeholder requirements, business discovery, engagement, and that's where we really step into their world. And we asked them what are their business objectives? Okay. And this is... I feel like it's a very... This is one of my favorite, favorite parts is you go and you ask what their business objectives are and just obviously they're looking for a data product, right? They're looking either for a visualization dashboard, reporting, whatever it is, right?

So we have, that meeting and we go over what they're looking for, their requirements, their business objectives, and then we also ask what their challenges are, right? And somewhere in between their objectives and their challenges, you find those critical points that will help, because they are mirrors of each other, their

business objectives and their challenges is, and if you've pinpoint that, well, this is your challenge, and then these are your business objectives, but you have this data that you need that's missing, or that, you know, what you're looking at, or, just kind of identifying the gap in between that is, I think that is like a secret sauce. Then when you, and when you kind of bring that up to them later down or, in the next step, they get hooked.

They get really, really hooked if you can, if you're able to identify that. And then they immediately almost like find, see the value in that. And so, creating those milestone and then, and updating them along the way and strategically understanding, what do all of their needs look like for data analytics, right? Across their, function or their business domain. And then also looking at what other functions are requiring aside, from them and looking at if there's any interconnected, data sets that will be overlapping, right? And so then you create this strategic roadmap that like, helps them understand where does their requests, where they land, right? And then you continue that conversation.

0:20:56 Scott Hirleman

I think what you're, it's almost what you're talking about. I love the concept of data as a product, and I love bringing product thinking into data. But a lot of what you're talking about there is also project management of, just like we have done this historically of extracted what people need. We haven't done a great job because we've gone and treated it as a project instead of as a product. But there are so many of these ways for communicating with stakeholders and aligning them on these things to get people to, express this. And I think it's kind of what you, talked about there of getting them to lean into the conversation, right? Like there are, they feel these pains, they care about what they care about.

So like getting, focusing on what's of value to them. And sometimes people don't wanna tell you that. And what I've found that, I've told people is if somebody doesn't wanna work with you, there's other people in the organization that will. And so if somebody's not willing to tell you what their objectives are, where their pain points are, where they're gonna get value, you can find other people to do. But there's also this, assumption by data people that all data work has value instead of what's actually gonna have value to this person. Aaron Wilkerson, we talked a little bit about, him in the pre-call as well. He talked about there are these things where people will deliver insights to a line of business person and they, it's not something that they're focused on. And so then they're like, is this a value to you? This has to, they have to spend a bunch of time to even address, is this a value? Not only is this a useful insight, but even if it is a useful insight, is it something that's actually, that I'm gonna care about? Even if it is like a valid and usable insight.

And so, like how do you keep the, it's kind of funny 'cause the audience is data people, but how do you wrangle the data people to stay away from going down the data for the sake of data? The data for the data inherently creates value instead of like, let's focus on what matters and what's gonna deliver value. Like how do you focus everybody around that and also kind of get rid of the skepticism from the business execs who've had to deal with data people for far too long, delivering data instead of value? I know. Yet another harder question.

0:23:34 Saba Ishaq
It's funny because I have to be very careful with, my words because I feel like I'm a cross breed between like my data people and my business people. And there's one side, and I won't say which side that is very, very, sensitive or defensive towards saying things in a certain way. So I can't, it's hard for me to say, well work on something that matters. And it's like a huge, like my head would be on the chopping block, right? And so, and 'cause they're so passionate about it, but that really happened so much. You'll see, a data scientist working, for example, on something that will be, over a span of months or weeks or months, right? And then they present it and they're like, hey, is this, this is what I've been doing and is this like valuable to the stakeholder?

And it's just, it's hard to address those, but I think we kind of have to step back. We have to understand and step back. It's like, why do, why do they pursue those data projects, in the first place, right? And so I've seen that I, and, they're very adamant to like continue building that or working on that, but they have all these other ones that actually require to be, done or prioritized. So I kind of step back in those situations like, okay, what is it where that, they think that this is what they need to be working on, right? And where that's stemming from. And so I try to understand kind of like when it comes to the data world and data science and then an individual person, it's the rate of what's happening and the advancement and the skills and the capabilities. It's growing and it's expanding.

So people in their positions and their jobs and what they're doing, especially data scientists, they want to be able to work on things that are expanding their skillsets and their knowledge based on their experience. And so I think that incorporating work that is, or a mix, right? A combination of where they can have that outlet to grow their skill sets and enhance them and then also work on something else in conjunction and just kind of having that communication to kind of mitigate that scenario. 'Cause it does happen a lot, and to mitigate that scenario. And it's really important to then also the same communication that you're using to communicate with the stakeholders about what they've been requesting in regard to data and analytics for their functions or their domains, using that same communication and being transparent with their data teams, right?

Like, this is how we're prioritizing stuff and this is like a level five, let's say. Or this is, however you wanna prioritize it. This is what needs to be done right now. And how the prioritization is comes from where, where does that stem from? The importance of it, the criticality of it, the timing of when it's needed. Because to the business people, and their mindset is, time is money. To the data people, they're just like, data is all created equal, you know? And it's a different mindset, right? And then on the business side, it's like, time is money and that's the data that they need to do that.

0:27:22 Scott Hirleman
Yeah. Like that, whole aspect of data work inherently has value. And we need to teach the data folks that, that's not the case. But I do like what you're talking about of we can align around, time is money. So what's gonna get me value quickest? Like, let's talk about that and let's get you involved in an interesting project 'cause it's, a little bit of what you said is something that's really been a problem for some data mesh, implementers of, if people aren't working on interesting things, they're gonna go leave. They're gonna find somebody. Even, if they're not delivering value, they don't care because they can still get a job somewhere else. Not delivering value, but doing interesting things. And it's like, until we can get to, an entire world where people are actually delivering value instead of interesting projects via data, then they, can go elsewhere.

But like, how do you think about, we were talking in the pre-call. How do you think about how this then also ties into transformation? Because when I talk to companies around where they are right now, they're in that data work has value. We deliver data work instead of we deliver value. And value is supported by data work, right? And it's just a change in mindset. And so like how do you think about bringing that transformation conversation into data conversations? 'cause they've been typically very, very separate. And yet, there's change management of the organization, but there's also like, just digitizing everything about like your business and how that works. And there are many, many industries. There's, a lot of tech people, that work at, companies that are very, very high tech, and they think that everything already is there. And it's like, no, you talk to a lot of these industries and it's still not.

So like how do you have those conversations where you're kind of telling the other party, you are not mature enough to do this right now. So like, we need to work on maturity. Like how do you have those frank conversations without it becoming, you talked about there are some, parties out there that are somewhat defensive about certain things. That could be another thing where you say, you're not mature enough for this. Like, how do you bring in that you need to transform and not just, I need to deliver you this data, this data isn't gonna change much for the company. You need to do the transformation along with this.

0:30:04 Saba Ishaq

I think that just having those conversations and under, like, introducing that concept from a very high level standpoint, right? Infusing that concept and the criticality of it, right? So just for example, if speaking to a business stakeholder, I typically say, because of the rate of technology within the organization is expanding, right? So where they're updating more applications or implementing more systems and software, what's happening is that that's expanding. So with that, the gap between people, AKA change management and the gap between data increases more and more and more. And so if we don't have that going in two parallel universe or two parallel pathways, then it's only gonna get worse and worse and essentially it'll be a disconnected chaos, right? So it's like the gap increases more and more.

And so the need for it to be in sync with each other with digital transformation and data analytics so that you can prevent having fires, right? And in roadblocks later on. And being more proactive by scheduling and prioritizing, creating those strategies for data analytics, data governance along with your digital transformation. And just as how digital transformation is a continuous process. It's an iterative thing, right? And so just with that, so is data analytics and, data strategy or whatever people wanna call it, it goes hand in hand. So it's like as if Apple or HP creates a product, but they don't have anything that will kind of maintain and help maintain and sustain, the usability, and the efficiency and effectiveness of what they're delivering and I think that goes hand in hand.

0:32:31 Scott Hirleman

Yeah. So I've got a tough question for you, and I'm gonna ask you for a bold opinion and feel free to hand wave and say, I don't know, or, it depends. But, should the transformation be driven by the data folks or for most organizations, should there be somebody that owns the transformation that the data people partner with? And the reason why I'm asking this question is when I talk to people that are successful with data mesh, I probably only talk to one where I think a lot of the transformation was driven almost entirely by the data team, because that's not, typically you don't bring a data leader onto transform the overall organization, and yet we're being asked to transform the company via data. And so we're being asked to as if that was a simple thing, that the data transforms the company itself instead of somebody works through that transformation.

So if people are really looking to move forward from this, does that transformation aspect need to, you talked about parallel pathways, it's not merging the pathways. You talked about parallel pathways. Does there need to be somebody that owns the transformation and should that be owned in the data department? Or should that be, like, if you're a data leader and you don't have somebody that owns the transformation outside of the data department, are you kind of SOL are you kind of

like in trouble because you're being asked to transform the organization and that's not really how it works? Like I said, very difficult question.

0:34:10 Saba Ishaq

Yeah, it is. And I've seen that happen actually. I've seen that happen actually. And, it's funny because it's like when that happens, when the data leaders are responsible for, the digital transformation like strategies or initiatives, it's just like we don't have all the answers, but you're supposed to, it's like, you don't know all the answers for other systems and softwares and applications, but somehow, we're supposed to know out of thin air, right? And so it's like, that is, it is really a frustrating situation. And it's not as, you know, it's not easy. And with that being said, I don't agree with that approach where data folks, manage and maintain the digital transformation, right? It goes hand in hand.

So just like how digital transformation has product owners, that are, kind of the steward or owning and maintaining those, products within the IT, function in the infrastructure, it goes hand in hand. So data needs to have a product owner as well, a data product owner that can infuse like the data, stewardship, the ownership, the way it's being managed, the sustainability of it, and how that's cascaded and, connecting those things because it's gonna be really important. And it goes back to like, how do you really then, infuse it into the business stakeholders, right? And then that it stems from how they communicate to the business stakeholders. How do you educate them because they don't, these concepts of data governance or digital transformation, Like, it's very common that business folks do not know what those things mean.

And I think that people that are in these functions, like we toss words around like data governance and digital transformation so easily, like as if we were born, saying those words as our first words, when we're learning how to speak. And it's just like when you talk to somebody that's not in that realm, it doesn't, it's not only that, like they don't know what that is, but it means nothing to them, right? And so, like having those conversations, and like, I'm such a big advocate of, like a presentation or cascading like communication that is simple terms, and defining those and always starting the conversation on like defining things at a very basic level one. And then, and I think that's so important, but I think that, yeah, it needs, they need to, digital transformation is, separate from data analytics, like they, need to be separate.

0:37:16 Scott Hirleman

So if they aren't, right, if they, if the organization doesn't have somebody that is owning the transformation, do you have any advice for that data person other than kind of strap in? 'cause it's gonna be a bumpy ride, right? Like how would you think about having that conversation? Is it, hey, you can do, you can deliver all the data

that you want and you can still deliver some value, but if you don't have this, it's just gonna be extremely rough and protect your mental health. That seems to be the kind of prevailing conversation. I've talked with a couple of people on that, that seems to be their thing of like I talked to CDOs and why did you exit after six months? And they're like, because I wasn't gonna be able to do anything. There weren't anybody, there wasn't anybody to partner. They were asking me to wave this magic wand as if the data has all the answers. Instead of what answers, what do you need answers on, let's leverage data to help you get to better answers, better outcomes, better results.

But the data doesn't magically know exactly what we should do. So like, how do you think about talking to somebody and going like, here's your pathway to better. Is it to kind of push back and say, Hey, I need somebody that's owning this transformation, is it hey, like going exec by exec and going, we're gonna transform your line of business. We're not gonna try and transform the entire organization. Or like, how do you think about. And I know it's an incredibly difficult conversation or a question, but this is why I'm asking it is because I've talked to multiple people on this and I still don't have a great answer. I've got some perspectives on it, and I'm not asking you to have the answer, but like, I want your perspective because this is something you care about and you've seen that it's so much more challenging if you don't have it.

0:39:12 Saba Ishaq
So, okay, I wanna see if I understand it. So if you don't have people owning digital transformation, and it falls upon data analytics folks, how do we go about that, right?

0:39:25 Scott Hirleman
Or what advice would you have to those people and that, like, I've literally heard people say run, like that's their only advice, is just run.

0:39:31 Saba Ishaq
I get that sentiment and I know that like everybody wants to run in that. Yeah. I have, I will be very honest. I have been in those scenarios and so like, this is kind of speaking to my soul right now and when that's not there, right? And it's funny that you say that about CDO. I'm gonna touch on that, your comment that you made. But you have to kind of step back, right? Step back and really map out from the trees. Like what is the, as is state, what is the as is state, like what does that look like, okay? And then, you have to consolidate like what each function or team, department, whatever people would call it, domain, business domain, what are they asking, right? And then look at, again, when you have the as is state, you can see what data is available, or what's not there, what's there, what's not there, right?

And then well, actually, it's an overall messy process. And then you have to go, it's like

a headhunter. You have to be a headhunter and see who is like, who is who in the zoo, right? So if there is a product owner for Salesforce or Oracle or SAP, who is the right person that you need to talk to, that will know, okay, they're doing a upgrade or there's a migration going on or something. What's the activity? Who's the person that has that information for specific sources that is needed, right? Because if it's missing or if it needs to be updated on the databases and whatnot, you have to just become like this headhunter and be in constant communication with them in order to just incorporate digital transformation to data analytics in that sense.

It's not a pretty fun thing to do. It's not pretty process, but I think that helps a lot. And I think that once like people can understand like what you're trying to do, it helps them because in a essence or in a way, people stop bugging them if they know that you're looking for that information and you're trying to kind of just be more strategic about the situation. And so it kind of brings a sense of relief as well. And so it's a kind of a... It's crazy, but it also has a positive approach to it too.

0:42:18 Scott Hirleman
A little bit in there is that, the whole feeling seen and heard thing of like, oh, I'm not crazy. Like there is something that's going on where it's like there is a... Okay, somebody else recognizes the problem. I'm not the only one that's seeing this. I'm not the only one that's feeling this, and that I can actually communicate with this person and they get what's going on. And so I like that but again, it is that thing of, I think what you were talking about is that finding places to make progress, and I think this is... I love data as a product, but I started to think about data as a practice is almost more powerful to think about, when you think about your entire data work as interoperable or like kind of all moving in the same direction, and that you're thinking about, okay, products are how we split up our work, so that they are effective, but you still have to have a practice of how do you go about things? How is your organization approaching this? And that you have a cohesive approach to the way that you do data.

And I think that's, that like, how much transformation are you taking on is an interesting conversation. I'd love to hear how you think as well about integrating governance into those conversations because I've talked to a lot of people, I did an episode a long time ago about data mesh fight club, the first rule of fight club. Don't talk about fight club. The second rule, don't talk about fight club. A lot of governance folks say never mention the word governance, because it's such a dirty word. It has such a bad connotation. So like, when you're having these conversations, I get the sense that you can bring people in and have a legit conversation on their terms.

So how do you start to talk about governance, especially if we're talking federated governance, where some of it is falling back on that person of like, is it talking to

them again about their data pain points or is it like, how do you get them to start to realize where the problems are, and then start to say, and how much of this can we get you to take care of versus falling off everybody else? How do you bring that into those conversations without someone going data governance, get away?

0:44:51 Saba Ishaq
I love this question. So it's funny that you mentioned it and you talk about data governance as a like, hey, get away and who do you bring in? And there's discussions happening around this conversation and some people say that there needs to be a data steward, right? A data governance steward, right? But then if in my opinion, I just like how there's certain skill sets or in a job role that says communication is needed, a good collaborator or supplier relations experience, whatnot. I think that going forward, the need for somebody having some sort of experience with data in the business roles is going to become more and more required. And so then now let's tie back and like, how do we get people to kind of not just step back like the scared cat kind of like crawling away. Don't make eye contact, 'cause I don't wanna be responsible or accountable for like yeah. Any part of the data, but I need it, right?

And so how do you have those conversations? Well, yeah, you don't wanna go in there and be like, well, you know what? Congratulations, you're the one that I'm choosing to be responsible for some sort of part or element of data governance in your portion of the team or the function, right? So I think that again, defining what data governance is, and the concept of it, but then I really will say in what I've seen that, I don't know what I would say those percentages, but I don't know if it's like nine times out of 10. Nine times out of 10, their challenges or what they need or their problems that they're facing, their pain points is linked, interlinked with some sort of portion of data governance that they will be able to, they will be responsible or need to be responsible for innately, right?

So say for example, a business leader is like, can't really do this with the data, or this is what we're having with, a problems with the data, blah, blah, blah. It's usually a facet of that where they would have that ownership of like, data validation, or help putting the data cataloging or just like, how is the data modeled or how is the data identified in specific metrics or the calculations that go into it, right? And so incorporating that into their engagement. So like, you know how I said that having them engaged from every part of the process, that goes in, hand in hand with their involvement in data governance as well. So from the requirements gathering, then to testing and validating the data, that was put together on the backend, assigning somebody to do that and then what are the, like what is the visualizations that you guys are looking for or what is the expectations for that? Having somebody be involved in that on the business side, right?

And again, data validation and all of that streamlining it in that way from end to end is what I've seen kind of inherently or just cohesively incorporate data governance. At the same time, it engages the stakeholder and then they get their data analytics that they need, right? Versus, hey, we need this, and six months later or three months later, that's not what they needed at all. And then it's like, you go from data-driven to like data disengaged and people then start not trusting the data anymore, right? So it's like it goes hand in hand and then enable. In order to create a comprehensive or practical like data governance process, right? You have to create that collaboratively, right?
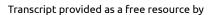
You can't just be like, hey, well, this is data governance process and you're gonna be a part of it, right? No, you have to engage the right stakeholders, the right people that are involved and say, let's develop this together. Let's see what this looks like together. What is gonna be more practical? And then what is your portion that is important, that is relevant to data governance processes and/or procedures? So for example, like the regulations, SEC regulations from the US. In IT and cybersecurity risk management, what is their element? Because it's all interlinked. Everybody is interlinked now. It's more and more so because of data and the dependency on data, and it's making people more and more interlinked. And I think that if people... They might not be aware of it now, but then it's becoming more and more, or business partners are having to be really tied to data more so than they did before.

0:50:23 Scott Hirleman
Yeah, I think what you were saying in there as well that really resonated with me was that we keep going into conversations with, I'm handing you something off at the start of that conversation, instead of going back to what do you need, what do you need, what do you need? And then it's like, okay, well okay, if you need that, at the end of the day, somebody needs to own that and that has to be you. And so like letting them kind of come to that realization, I used to be a tech recruiter. I only did it for like six, seven months. It was not my thing, but one of the things that I used in those conversations was to ask people before I told them about the role, I'd say, tell me what kind of role you want. Like, what is your dream role? Or what are you looking for?

And people would kind of tell me what they were looking for, and then we could kind of back into, was this role right for them? And it did give me the ability to sell the role. It felt like it was right, but there were multiple times when I'd be like, you seem like an amazing candidate, but not for this role. So like, let's stay in touch if one does come open, or I'll ping the hiring manager and see if they can open one 'cause I think you're a great candidate, a great fit, but not for this specific role. And I think letting people kind of come to the realization themselves instead of, I'm dropping this on your plate. I have this problem with the data mesh conversation where people go,

you're now gonna own your data. Instead of, you're not telling them what they're gonna get out of this. You're telling them what you as the data people are gonna get out of them. This is the data work that you now owe the rest of the organization. It's like, of course, they're not gonna do that. But like it's...

0:52:16 Saba Ishaq
Yeah. I think to add to what you just mentioned, I feel like, I live by this quote. It's like, you know what? If you don't know what you want, you're going to end up with a lot that you don't want. If you don't know what you want, you're gonna end up with a lot that you don't want. And so, say for example, like the business stakeholders, like you ask them, what do you need? What do you need? What do you need? And then they tell you. But there's some instances, and I would say actually a lot of instances, and what I've seen across the years is that, they don't even know sometimes what they need. So then it gets more and more important on helping them understand what they need by asking the right questions, because they don't even know how to articulate what they need in data terms, or even what is available for them to even get in terms of the insights they're looking for, right? And so fostering that engagement and helping them understand kind of what they need along the way, and asking the right questions is so important because they just sometimes don't know what they need, but they know they need it.

0:53:36 Scott Hirleman
Yeah. And data people have a history of instead of extracting what they need, extracting what data work do you want me to do? What data work do you want me to do? Instead of like, what value do you want us to deliver? Then let's work towards that value. But yeah, so I wanted to kind of wrap head into the end of the conversation on the kind of third main topic we were looking at. It's like, where do we even start when it comes to delivering value through data? And I wanted to kind of poke at something that you were talking about in our pre-call about the data as a product kind of philosophy and just trying to, if you're in a very, very centralized approach, it's not as if it's a switch, you flip and you just go, Hey, yesterday we were data as a product, now we are.

And like I wanna get into something really interesting that you said about ticketing, and we can talk about data product discovery. I'm working with some folks around a new podcast that I'm luckily not gonna be on, people don't need to hear more of me. But about talking about product discovery and like, how do we actually figure out what people need? But like, when you're going into these organizations, most organizations think everybody else is very, very functional with their data and they're very dysfunctional. And it's no, everybody's dysfunctional with their data. So you don't need to feel too bad that you're not operating at Zhamak's exact picture of what data mesh looks like.

But how do you think about moving in the right direction towards delivering value through data instead of delivering data and assuming it has value? Like where should people look to start? Is it trying to partner with a couple of one or two business domains and be like, let's build some momentum there, or like trying to say, okay, we're gonna implement an overall governance program and try and do like a much broader approach. Like what have you found that works? Is it about again, finding those kind of low hanging fruit versus low hanging and mid-hanging fruit and that you're gonna have winds that come along as well? Or like, how do you get people headed down that path? And I know it depends, is the correct answer, but it's also like, what have you seen that really does typically stand out for you?
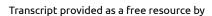
0:55:58 Saba Ishaq
Yeah. Okay. So I like this question because I was prepared for this and I'll kind of go, I think there's like a, I think I have maybe like eight, like parts of it. Just really quickly. So delivering data as a value to the business stakeholders, how do you go about that versus just delivering data? And so again, just have those conversations and being collaborative and understanding their business objectives and their challenges. How can you, and then seeing how you can address their challenges with data, like, how can you help drive their business goals with data and kind of having those conversations and helping them understand and shine some light on that concept and then after that subtle infusion of data governance and business transformation. Again, they're not familiar with these concepts.

And so when you're having these conversations now, they're going to be a little bit more open to understanding what it is and then how it plays into what they do and how important it is in order for them to get what they need. This is kind of like, it's like a partnership between business stakeholders in IT or the data function, and then from there, aligning business priorities. So when you are able to align the priorities of what's needed, you're able to define and produce data as a value more because you're aligned. And then when you do that with your priorities, you're more likely able to, and this is what I always suggest is that deliver something of value as soon as possible upfront, like, just be strategic, be strategic about it and nail down what you can bring to value to the stakeholders quicker so then they can see, they can understand.

And so the longer you take, it's just by human nature, they're just like, yeah, okay, that data group, prehistoric. Like it's history. Just set it and forget it. But I think that the quicker you are able to figure out and prioritize and strategically deliver data, something of data that is valuable and convey that and produce that and demonstrate that, deliver that, and then convey the success story, convey the impact that it had or... Yeah, it helps. And so then that helps you kind of embed the data governance processes and procedures. And I think that, yeah, I think for the gist of it,

that helps bring that data to a value and breeds life into it and kind of infuses and has a more of an influence into the organization when you approach it in that angle.

0:59:09 Scott Hirleman
Yeah, I think one thing that I think really resonates with me is where you're talking about, like, how do we incrementally deliver value instead of, okay, I've taken in the requirements from everybody, and in three years from now, I'm going to go away and deliver the most value. And it's like the world will have changed, everything will have changed. Yeah, all the people will have left. And it's just like, no, that's not it. And so a lot of what you were talking about there was, again, it's something that I've really struggled with, with talking to data people about delivering value. People get so bogged down with what is the exact value, the exact return on investment, the exact thing, and trying to measure it, but also on treating value, going back to something you mentioned early, treating value as if it's equal no matter when it's delivered. And so if you deliver 100 million of value next month versus 10 billion of value in five years, the 100 million is actually more valuable.

I mean, it can get a little bit goofy but even in that case, because that 10 billion is so uncertain and everything will have changed and you'll have spent so much money to deliver that. And so, I was trying to talk with somebody about return on investment and how in venture capital, which I used to do a little bit of VC work, and there's this concept of IRR, which is your internal rate of return, which is how much are you getting back and how quickly. And so doubling your money in three months is better than 10X-ing your money in five years. And so there becomes all sorts of goofy things of how that all works, the math and stuff, but it becomes this thing of like, how are we building momentum and showing value to get them to lean in further and further and further, build those champions up, build those people that are leaning in that want to work more and more with the data. And so you've got to deliver wins and you got to deliver quick wins, but you've also got to get past only delivering small scale, quick wins relatively quickly.

But you, again, have to balance when things are coming in and how you invest and how that returns. And I think a lot of what you were talking about there was like, going in there and saying, like, what are your strategic priorities for the next three months, the next six months and the next year? And let's start to work on those, because we need to deliver value. There are things that we can do that can deliver value very quickly, and we don't have to go into that super, super project mindset, but there are also much bigger things that if we're only focused on this month. They never build up to anything bigger. So I think a lot of what you were talking about there was like, just have honest conversations with your business people.

1:02:35 Saba Ishaq

Yeah. Yeah.

1:02:35 Scott Hirleman
So I just talked a whole lot at you there. Is there anything that you wanted to react to in there that you thought was...

1:02:40 Saba Ishaq
Yes, I love that you touched on that more because understanding their business objectives, and I just want to pause. I think that it's just so, so incredibly important to be strategic with data, and I don't think that people are strategic enough when it comes to data. And I think that that's very critical on how you deliver value to the business stakeholders. And when you are strategic with data, and again with the quick wins versus the long wins, and when you outline that and you have that outline and you have that drawn out, in a sense, right, you are more likely to figure out even alternatives in the interim if there's something extremely critical or extremely needed.

And it's one of those longer term value works where it's like, yes it's going to take a long time to deliver this, but you can then find an interim solution or alternative that overlaps with building and goes hand in hand with all the work that goes in the backend to build what they need to do, but also come up with an alternative solution in the interim too, and then along with these quick wins and stuff like that. So it's so important to be strategic with data.

1:04:11 Scott Hirleman
Well, there's one thing in there that I think people could misinterpret, which is you were saying be strategic with data, but it's not only people make this mistake, and I don't think you are at all, but of thinking that data is only for strategic decisions instead of making strategic decisions about your data use and integrating it into your operational excellence, because excellent execution is going to beat perfect strategy nine times out of 10, 99 times out of 100. Like it's so much about the execution. So being strategic about how do we integrate this into what matters to you as the business person is so important. And that's that. Like being strategic and then not focusing. You were talking about strategic, not the tactical of getting so bogged down by the data work is the thing that creates the value, like the very specifics, instead of understanding and getting people to at least directional, getting them to value quicker, not perfect, but good enough. And I think it's all kind of coming through in a lot of what you're talking.

1:05:26 Saba Ishaq
That's true. Yeah. That's very spot on. Exactly. I think that business... It's just like people have their perception or the concept of the same thing in different ways in

different worlds. So, like, strategic with data from a business perspective can mean something else, but when a data person thinks about being strategic with data, it could mean something else. And so, for example, being strategic with data or people on the data side, look at data as a byproduct or a raw material that comes from the operational folks, and then the business people look at data, and they look at data from their inherent value as an asset of what it tells them. And it's just like the two different perspectives, and it's like understanding how people look at things and how they conceptualize is really interesting. I think that, yeah.

1:06:28 Scott Hirleman
A lot of what you're talking about, Danilo Sato and Andrew Harmel-Law, I think it was episode 22 or 24 or something. They ended the episode with Danilo was just like, please, just talk to each other. And I think a lot of what you're saying here is just like, understand where that person's coming from. It's not as if you're that separate. And one thing. So, I mean, we've covered a whole heck of a lot of different things. Is there anything we didn't cover that you'd like to or any way that you want to wrap up kind of the content side of the episode?

1:07:01 Saba Ishaq
No, I think that we've covered a lot of the topics, and it was just such great points, and it was, yeah, I think we did hit on everything.

1:07:13 Scott Hirleman
Yeah, very fun conversation, and I'm sure there's going to be a lot of other people that would love to have a conversation with you as well. So is there any place specifically that you'd like people reaching out? Anything specific that you'd like them reaching out about? I mean, I know you've got a consulting company, so if anybody's looking for help, but as well, anything specific you'd like them reaching out about?

1:07:31 Saba Ishaq
Yeah, well, anything especially related to what we've talked about. I just love having those discussions and how to navigate certain areas of, again, what we've talked about. And so reaching out to me on LinkedIn or on my website or just even emailing me, I will be happy to have those conversations with anything regarding data strategy, how to streamline data analytics, governance, and just, I'm so passionate about it and I love... I could talk for days and days and I felt like this, just like, I felt like we've just been talking for ten minutes, I feel. And it's crazy. I think maybe I'm a little crazy too, but this is so fun.

1:08:16 Scott Hirleman
Yeah, for sure. Well, and we'll drop links to that stuff in the show notes so people can

easily find you and reach out. But, but again, Saba, thank you so much for spending the time here with me today and as well, thank you everyone out there for listening.

1:08:28 Saba Ishaq
Thank you. Thank you. That's so much fun.

1:08:32 Scott Hirleman
I'd again like to thank my guest today, Saba Ishaq, CEO and founder of our own data as a service consultancy Decide Data. You will find a link to her LinkedIn 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 kind of 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 are 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. Read, kind of 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 kind of 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? We also have some free programs around introductions and roundtables that people can kind of check out as well.

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