



Data Driven Culture



Why data culture matters

Organizations with a strong data culture value analytics as a critical part of doing business and work to create a shared understanding around how data can and should be used.

At this point, it's pretty much a given that data is (or should be) a key component of any business. But if your company interprets "being data driven" as compiling routine reports on a few north star metrics, you've got a long way to go.

Without a strong data culture, you run the risk of pulling reports to check a box, not to find insights. Even worse, your team may begin turning to data to support their biases rather than challenging them.

Thankfully, creating a data driven culture doesn't have to be an impossible dream. In this guide, we'll walk you through how and why you should:



Evaluate your current data culture

Requiring team members to look at their numbers regularly is a start on the road to a great data culture, but it's just the first step.

So how can you tell whether your company has a strong data culture? If...

- Objectives are fuzzy and results are siloed within specific teams
- Data is trapped in apps and spreadsheets
- Core metrics are reported inconsistently and don't have shared definitions
- Tracking and success measurement aren't part of planning new projects
- Reporting is ad hoc and used once, never to be thought of again

...you should think about investing in your organization's relationship to data.



Be empathetic toward data wary colleagues

As with any organizational change, creating a data driven culture can be tough.

While it may be tempting to rant about business users' lack of data savvy or their reluctance to get involved in data projects, their attitude may make sense.

After all, if just pulling a report is a hideously manual time suck, it's no wonder that your non-analysts teammates are wary of embarking on a new data project.

Likewise, if business users don't have the authority, bandwidth, or expertise to act on insights, it may be reasonable for them to focus their efforts elsewhere.

And if the data may reveal individual or departmental performance issues, your colleagues may be concerned about shining a light on it.

Understanding what's fueling your colleagues' misgivings is key. In many cases they're not just expressing an irrational dislike of numbers, they're reacting to broader concerns about how (and whether) data will be used.

What happens when data culture doesn't come from the top?

Let's be real: Having influential execs on board with your data project is great. That means more funding, more leverage, and a whole lot less hassle.

Unfortunately, not all organizations have that kind of buy-in. If your exec team is lukewarm about data, here are some things to try:

- Position data as an asset, not a cost center, by focusing on ROI
- Set up a low-risk proof of concept that fits within your company's existing strategy
- Use data to identify quick, impactful wins for key stakeholders

Tactics like these can help establish the value of data and secure support for initiatives that go well beyond dashboard creation.

Understand data as a give and take

Just getting access to data can be a major problem for analytics teams. While that can be the result of permission-based blockers like API keys, it can also be a cultural problem.

Analysts who've dealt with colleagues who don't want to share their data have probably heard one or more of the following:

I don't trust other people messing with my numbers.

Figuring out how to give you access is a pain.

There's stuff in my data that might embarrass me.

How's this going to help me? Why should I care?

If everyone knows what I know, why do they need me?

Again, empathy can go a long way here. But you can also change hearts and minds by focusing on the kinds of insights teams can get from their data.

If you find that some people are still hesitant, creating internal "case studies" can be helpful. Stories that illustrate how data projects have led to better decision making or improved outcomes may be more convincing than just pointing to numbers.

When trying to make data sharing part of your organizational culture, here are some do's and don'ts to keep in mind:

Do

- Create a safe environment for sharing key info
- Make sharing data easy and expected
- Share insights and celebrate wins

Don't

- Ask for access without providing—and asking for—context
- Make sharing data a chore
- Silo analyses in inaccessible reports or dashboards

Treat data as a product

One way to create a truly transformative data culture is to approach data as a product. That means giving serious thought to

- 1) who your “users” are and
- 2) how to create deliverables that will actually get used.

By treating data as a product, it becomes a thoughtful part of business strategy, not just a stream of one-off requests. Likewise, this approach can put an end to your data team’s days as a dashboard factory by ensuring that data creates value, not just completed tickets.

Step 1: User research

The first step in treating data as a product is user research. That means getting a granular understanding of

- Who you’re building for
- What their current pain points are
- What data they’d love to get their hands on but don’t currently have
- What questions they wish they could answer
- How data products should be “packaged” and delivered

To do this, you don’t need a five-page memo on user personas. You just need to spend a little time understanding your teammates’ needs and sketching out a few guidelines you can use when creating analyses.

Pro-tip: Meet data users where they are

When doing user research, you’ll likely find that some departments—like finance—are pretty comfortable with data across the board.

In other cases, though, you may find that some members of a department are fairly data savvy while others are less sophisticated. For example, your marketing lead may be very numbers-driven, while your company’s social media coordinator may not have as much experience with data.

To serve all of those users well, you may need to design your data product to cater to the least adept users while ensuring that power users can still benefit from your work.

Step 2: Create an MVP and iterate

The heart of a product mindset is getting feedback from real users. That means the only way to know if your project is on track is to put something in front of the people who'll actually use it to see what they think.

The important thing here is to start small. It can be tempting to assume that you know what your users will want—or to show off your mad data viz skills—but that's exactly what you shouldn't do.

Instead, try creating a nonfunctional prototype. Whether it's a quick Google Sheet, PowerPoint slide, or whiteboard drawing, a mockup can help create alignment between yourself and your users.

Low-fi for high impact results

It may sound counter intuitive, but if your users are timid about providing feedback, a low fidelity mockup is often the way to go.

Whether they're holding back because they don't know what they need or because they're worried about how much of your time they're taking up, sharing a clearly unfinished WIP (work in progress) can open the door for conversation.

When you're ready to start building the final product, don't go all-in. Instead, create an MVP (minimum viable product) and schedule time for your users to play around with it.

That gives them the opportunity to provide more targeted feedback and it gives you the chance to note what really seems to work for them, where they struggle, and what else they need.

For example, your teammates may not think to lay out the different ways they slice time series data when requesting a report. However, watching them talk through how they might use a prototype may reveal that although weekly rollups will be used most often, they'll also need to pull monthly and quarterly versions.

Step 3: Launch and promote your product

Once you've got a finalized report or production-ready dashboard, it's time to promote your work.

Your go-to-market plan doesn't have to be as elaborate as a long-awaited album drop. But taking some time to make users aware of and excited about what you've built helps adoption and contributes to the pervasiveness of data at your organization.

While you could present at an all-hands meeting or do a walk-through for a particular department, there are tons of other ways to get the word out:

- Announce the launch on Slack
- Send a company-wide email
- Host a casual brown bag session
- Set up a formal training for key users
- Reach out to users individually

If that sounds like a lot, no worries. You can always start with one or two options, figure out what works, and decide what to do next. Just remember: If you get people using and loving what you've built, that's a major win.

Make using data a habit

Adoption is critical to a data driven culture, but that means turning to data as a habit, not just in preparation for a monthly meeting. After all, dashboards that double as wallpaper may look good but they won't make an impact on your company's bottom line.

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While you can't force users to incorporate data into their daily routines, there are ways to inspire better data use that won't get you in trouble with HR.

Balance “better than nothing” and best practices

Every analyst has been there: You got a data request so you built a magnificent query and a gorgeous chart to go with it. You go to unveil your interactive pièce de résistance in your shiny new BI tool...and the stakeholder asks which button they can use to download the .csv.

We admit: the situation isn't ideal. But after a few deep breaths (and maybe a walk around the block), it's important to realize that while the user may not engage with the data the way you want, at least they're using it!

When it comes to this kind of situation, meeting teammates where they are is a good first step in solidifying your data culture. Just make sure to remind them there's a better way the next time they complain about having to update that spreadsheet.

Promote your successes

Too often, data teams create amazing analyses for an audience of one. While that's a necessary part of the job, it's also a missed opportunity.

Publicizing the data products you create makes it possible for the entire company to appreciate the work you've done. But it's also an excellent way to educate your organization about what kinds of analysis are possible and what use cases they best fit.

What should that promotion look like? You could try sharing weekly roundups on Slack or even creating a monthly newsletter of the data team's top contributions.

Gamify your BI

Most modern BI tools allow you to track usage, so why not use that feature to build a little buzz?

In your newsletter or Slack message, consider naming one of your colleagues a Metrics Mogul or crowning them Numbers Nobility based on the number of queries they've run, dashboards they created, time spent in the tool, or number of active sessions.

Gamification calls attention to folks that are using data regularly and can create friendly competition in your organization.

Encourage better questions

If you're frustrated by business users making transactional requests for data on a particular metric, you're not alone.

While your colleagues may want to save you time by making their ask as specific and streamlined as possible, they may not realize that more context often results in more valuable insights.

Thankfully, coaching your company to ask better questions isn't rocket science. Here are some strategies to try:

- Have live conversations. Yes, it means more meetings, but getting the info you need up front can save you a lot of back and forth over the course of a project.
- Focus on problems, not metrics. Help users identify what they want to do or solve with the data rather than the numbers they want to pull.
- Get aligned around deliverables. Find out how they'd like to view the data, how often they'll need it, and whether they need a one-time snapshot or ongoing updates.
- Call out good questions in the wild. Model good question asking during team meetings and publicly compliment others who ask the kinds of questions you want to encourage.

Finally, be patient as your organization makes the transition to being data driven and celebrate successes along the way.

Build a network of allies

Trying to transform your business into a data driven powerhouse can feel overwhelming. That's why smart data analysts don't go it alone.

Why bother building these bridges? That's simple: A network of allies can spread the data driven gospel faster and wider than you can alone.

Along with helping others in their department successfully use your data products, allies play a critical role in data culture. By regularly asking "Do we have data on that?" and "What do the numbers say?" they make turning to data normative, not a nice-to-have.

Identify potential allies

Finding allies can seem daunting when data isn't already embedded in your company culture or if you're working on a tiny data team. But if your org has folks who are excited about data, you've got allies in the making.

- When looking for allies, target people who:
- Depend on data in their daily work
- Hate pulling manual reports or working in spreadsheets
- Help others on their team who need assistance with data
- Already know a bit about data but want to be more independent or up their data game

Along with seeking out people who are good at data, look for "organic leaders": people who are respected and trusted in their department or throughout the company. If you can form an allegiance with an organic leader, they're likely to bring along a lot more data converts.



Strategically diversify your data squad

In an ideal world, you'll have a whole panoply of potential allies to work with. If that's the case, it's a good idea to diversify the group to touch every corner of the organization.

At this point, it may also be wise to use your data work to develop new allies. If buy-in from a particular exec would make your life a whole lot easier, knocking out a quick project for their team could result in valuable long-term support.

If you do have to pick and choose who to partner with, consider carefully which teams carry the most clout at the company and whether they're likely to promote the data driven culture you're trying to create.

Develop your allies' data skills

For your allies to be effective, they need to operate at a reasonable baseline.

What that means is absolutely relative at both the company and department levels. While grabbing pre-built reports from a centralized BI tool may be noteworthy at one organization, another may assume that users can write their own SQL queries.

Focus on the skills that “matter”

When thinking about where to set your baseline for allies, having a sense of what matters to their teams is important.

If you've got an ally in a department that's inspired by data viz, coaching them in best practices and the UX of different types of charts could make a big impact.

Meanwhile, if another team is obsessed with understanding their conversion or user funnel, helping your ally figure out how to segment the data to get more insight into what's going on could be a big deal.

Ultimately, the goal is to equip your allies with the skills they need to influence their colleagues, whatever those might be.

While your allies may not be ideal “analytics customers,” they have to be able to speak authentically about the value of data. Otherwise, you could create a cadre of well-intentioned cheerleaders whose words won't carry much weight.

Turn your allies into a network

Once you've identified allies and verified they're up to speed, it's time to connect them so they can support and learn from one another.

A great way to network your allies is to create shared spaces for them to learn and ask questions. That could be as formal as ongoing training sessions or as informal as a Slack channel dedicated to data.

You could also pair an ally who's strong in an area like building reports in a shared BI tool with someone who needs help sorting out their dimensions and metrics.

And don't forget to gather your allies when you're facing big decisions about new data tools or long term plans. Using allies as a sounding board or hands-on testers can help you make more informed decisions and create relationships across departments.

Not only does creating a network of allies mean you don't have to be everywhere at once, it contributes to your org's data culture by decentralizing data conversations.

Leverage FOMO

Once your ally network is in place, you can tap into the "fear of missing out" (aka, FOMO).

Simple things like shout-outs at company-wide meetings, early access to new data "toys," and professional development opportunities can make being part of the data inner circle attractive.

Likewise, consider offering small tokens like certificates for folks who complete an internal training. Whether silly or serious, even a minimal effort at branding can increase cohesion among your allies and make participating in data initiatives attractive.



Get the right tech

The final component of a strong data culture is having the right tech in place.

We've talked in detail elsewhere about what goes into a modern data stack and how to choose the right tools for your use case, so we won't go too deep into that here.

The TL;DR version is that any tech you introduce to your data stack should:

- Make data more accessible
- Be easy for your team to use
- Automate routine tasks

The reality is that if working with data is a chore, creating a data driven culture means overcoming not just organizational inertia but the friction required to pull reports.

And that's where a tool like Panoply comes in. Code-free ETL makes it easy to tap into data from across your company, while a managed data warehouse makes it simple to create a single source of truth for all your data.

"Plus, with all the time you'll save not having to manually input schema and stay ahead of API updates, you'll free up bandwidth for making data the centerpiece of your organization.

Book a demo to learn more about how Panoply makes it possible.

REQUEST DEMO



About Panoply

Panoply is a cloud data platform that makes it easy to sync, store, and access your data. Panoply enables you to:

- Connect all your data sources without complicated code
- Automatically store raw data in the cloud in analysis-ready tables
- Build core business logic into your data to keep metrics consistent
- Seamlessly update dashboards and BI tools, no manual effort required
- Spend more time on analysis and less on managing data

If you'd like to learn more about Panoply and whether we're a good fit for your modern data stack, [book a demo](#) with us! We'd love to show off what Panoply can do and learn more about what your organization is hoping to achieve with data.

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