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If You Want Your Analytics to Matter, Put Your Ego on the Shelf

Kathleen Maley · May 18, 2020

We are living through the most globally disruptive event of our lifetimes, and how we navigate it for ourselves, our loved ones, and our organizations will have long-term consequences. Analytics professionals are rapidly developing new data-visualizations and models. News outlets have given considerable airtime to their work, illustrating how important – even life-saving – it is to have an agile, action-oriented data and analytics culture in place. Now and during the economic upturn to follow, the ability to leverage data for value will become a differentiator between companies that succeed and those that fail.

Many businesses understand that but still face the ongoing challenge of *how* to fully integrate analytical solutions into business decision-making and processes. They may have invested in analytical talent and leadership but aren't getting the value they were promised. Fortunately, the solution is beginning to reveal itself.

For almost two decades, analytics professionals – myself included – have focused nearly all our energy on evolving our own organizations. As a new function within the corporate landscape, this may have been necessary. It’s obvious now, however, that by largely ignoring our business partners’ change-management needs we have severely hampered their ability to leverage the capability we are so eager to provide. In some cases, we seek their support for analytics initiatives, but in reality, there is no such thing as an analytics initiative – only business initiatives supported by analytics. How we reorient our relationship with business partners can transform an organization’s ability to realize the value of analytics. Here are some ways to do that.

Always lead with the business

Phrases like "data-driven," "leading with analytics" and "proactive analytics" are often misunderstood to mean that analytics should operate outside of the business to produce solutions we believe they should be using or, even worse, that analytics should usurp the decision-making authority of business leaders. As analytics professionals, we rightly believe in what we bring to the table, but we must acknowledge that our business partners are not *our* stakeholders; we are *their* support partners. This subtle shift in mindset better anchors us to our primary purpose: making our specialized skill accessible to the business so they can achieve better outcomes.

This is not to say that analytics should be order takers. We often play a very important role in defining business strategies by revealing hidden opportunities, identifying emerging risks, and recommending novel solutions, but we should always work within the framework of the business to do so.

Be explicit about the role of analytics

It is human nature to fill an information void with catastrophe. If a good friend hasn’t replied to a text in more than a week we don’t imagine he’s on the trip of a lifetime. More likely, we worry something bad has happened.

So, too, might business leaders imagine the worst if analytics leaders don't explicitly communicate what our role is and what it isn’t. The last thing a business leader wants is someone “interfering” in their business. We should make it clear that we come in peace with powerful tools that can help them solve whatever problems are preventing them from reaching their goals. They still own the business decisions. We are advisors, and they need to know that we know our role. It's useful to start a partner relationship with the phrase, “Help me understand what you're trying to achieve, so I can better meet your needs." It signals a desire to be part of their team and part of the solution they seek, not a threat they need to fight off.

Set realistic expectations

It is important to set and manage expectations. Adopting an analytical solution is often far more work for the business than the analytics team that developed it. If that isn't understood by the business upfront, then they won't budget for it in dollars and man-hours and won't be able to implement it, even if they really want to and the potential value is large. This is a worst-case scenario in which everyone involved is frustrated and we've produced a negative return on investment instead of realizing the potential value identified – worse than not having built the solution in the first place.

Listen, listen, listen

(and be patient)

Business partners have varying degrees of familiarity, interest and trust in analytics, so it behooves us to do a little reconnaissance upfront. Ask partners what experience they have had with data analysis. Ask them about the quality of their experience. Try to find the true believers or at least those who are likely to become believers most quickly.

Once we've found them, listen to the problems they are facing. Listen to what they're trying to achieve. Be patient, even when we see opportunities that we think are bigger and better. If we hear them say, "If I only knew X, I could..." then we need to get to work solving for X. Think of it this way: If we hire a contractor to re-do a bathroom, we expect him to advise on the process; we don't expect him to recommend re-doing the kitchen instead. And worse, if every meeting requires a re-justification of our decision, then we might decide not to work with him at all.

By helping our partners achieve their immediate goals, we build trust and credibility; and once we've established ourselves as trustworthy advisors, then we can start influencing priorities.

Business conditions change, and every good leader needs to adapt. Data analysts can help. We never want to make a business leader feel she's not in charge, but we also don't want her to be unprepared for subtle but significant shifts in the market. By listening to the needs of our partners, being explicit about the role of analytics, and setting realistic expectations; we can establish ourselves as trusted advisors and create self-perpetuating, systemic organizational transformation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Maley is a business leader who specializes in the science of data and analytics. Her passion is found in guiding business leaders toward better outcomes by integrating data into their business processes and accelerating an organization's journey toward value-generating *analytics. Kathleen started her career building predictive models and leading several business analytics teams at Bank of America. Later, as the bank's consumer deposits pricing executive, she transformed the business from intuition-based to predictive model-base. In her most recent role as KeyBank's Head of Consumer and Digital Analytics, Kathleen increased the economic impact of her analytics team by elevating their role from data provider to strategic partner. Kathleen is a board member and volunteer statistician for Turner Syndrome Society of the United States, and she holds degrees in Mathematics and Applied Statistics.*

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If analysts won't assume responsibility then they should not have any authority.

If initiatives can't address the "to what ends?" questions in any tangible, coherent or verifiable way then those initiatives do not deserve to live.

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