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'23

Honest,
No-BS Recap

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Introduction

In 2023, the business leadership landscape significantly changed—especially in the spheres of data management and the incorporation of new technologies into our lives.

We marked these changes one month at a time, through a unique series of events known as the #HonestNoBS dinners. These gatherings took place across several global cities: New York City, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, London, Denver, San Diego, Seattle, Orlando, and Washington, DC. They brought together over 150 data leaders from large enterprises.

Through spirited discussions, we brought everything to the table: data catalogs, governance, AI, culture, reliability, innovative approaches to analytics, and more. All the leaders attending the dinner had to be prepared to answer the following two questions: What's working in the data world? What's not working in the data world?

At the end of the year, we walked away with a comprehensive and candid view of the data landscape (because luckily, we took notes!). These professionals are the tip of the spear when it comes to enterprise data management. What data leaders notice today will have a ripple effect for tomorrow's data teams.

> **What data leaders notice today will have a ripple effect for tomorrow's data teams.**

So let's dive into the obstacles data teams face, and the opportunities that lie ahead. If you're a business leader, data professional, analyst, or simply a data enthusiast, let these takeaways offer guidance and inspiration for navigating the ever-evolving world of data and technology.

What worked in 2023

While scattered across a variety of industries, the #HonestNoBS dinner participants brought some through lines to our discussions. First, we'll look at what worked.

The marriage of business and data

The fight to prioritize data has been won; there's buy-in at executive levels around the importance of data. In fact, executives are eager to integrate data with business outcomes. The conversation has recently shifted; it's now all about the *best* ways to integrate data into the business, versus *whether* to integrate data into the business.

Leaders now have a backlog of data use cases. In fact, they're hard-pressed to find an area of the business that data *doesn't* touch. Better yet, data leaders often find themselves with an advocate at the C-level; for example, an executive might determine that every product feature release *must* have analytics.

Data isn't just humming away in the background. It's now considered an "offensive strategy" that is directly tied to revenue-generating campaigns and projects. And data champions are myriad. One leader shared: "Present a business use case describing how much revenue increase or cost reduction will occur, provide all the details, and if you really stand by it, put your job on the line; i.e., 'If we don't make this, I'll leave the company.'"

In other words, **it's the golden age of data feeding better business outcomes**. People org-wide now care about data, and there is a lot of it. People want to learn more, and they understand that data is the key. In addition, technology is now very scalable, so data is growing more accessible across the business, not just for "data people."

Data culture: The intricate dance between people and numbers

Leaders are hitting their stride when it comes to fostering a culture of data fluency. Some teams are running "Office Hours" and creating communities around organizational data. Others are recognizing the incentives to share data, like cost savings and value creation.

Leaders mentioned the need to follow the FAIR data principles: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable. People inside data teams, and even beyond, are rising to meet the challenges of creating and using FAIR data. And, when one team is doing this well, other teams want to jump on the bandwagon.

Another leader mentioned the creation of a "KPI council" inside their organization. That means they catalog current KPIs, reduce them to a reasonable number, and then assign ownership to maintain them.

There's a more open, easier, and freer attitude towards data in many organizations. They're not sharing data in only individual use cases; they're just opening it up and creating transparency. Many organizations mentioned initiatives to highlight star users of data, or gamify data's usage, in order to truly foster a culture of data fluency.

One leader even spoke about the creation of a training team to ask "Why?" five times, when solving a problem, to ensure that all projects kick off with a full understanding of the intent behind the project.

Teams are increasing their use of data catalog, and keeping track of organizational knowledge that way. In addition, they hold knowledge-sharing events and data source discussions. It's clear that creating a true "data culture" is turning into a top-down priority this year.

FAIR data principles:

01	02	03	04
Findable	**Accessible**	**Interoperable**	**Reusable**
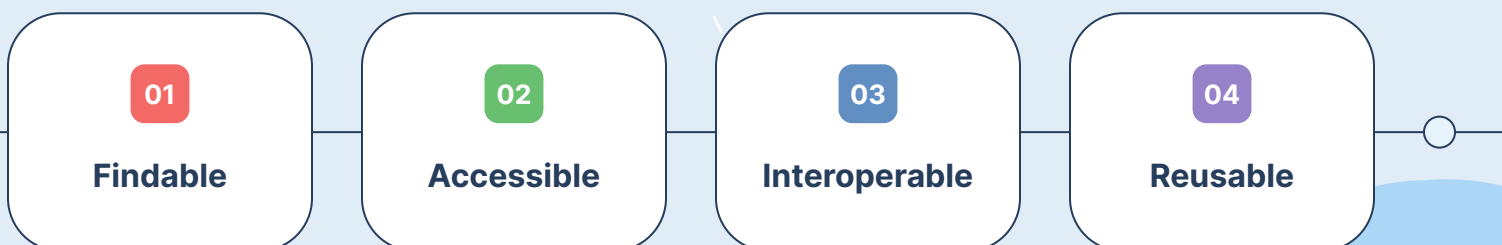
Data governance: The risky business

When it comes to data governance, teams no longer see legal officers as a blocker. Most would agree that the risks of falling out of compliance aren't worth it, when it comes to data. Largely, there is buy-in that the goal is to ensure compliance. More companies are doing data governance in general, and they're moving from consultants to the organizations doing governance on their own.

Data leaders mentioned that agile data governance and a decentralized, federated model were factors in their success in 2023. In one organization, a central team proposes semantic/taxonomies, then gets feedback from federated domains in a joint workshop. They focus on core concepts tied to business needs and regulations.

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> **You can't say 'governance' without enablement, it's like taxation without representation.**

"Safe failure" is working for some leaders. What does that mean? Let users try something new without data governance. Then, when it fails, they see the need for governance first-hand. It's easier to sell to those customers, since they've lived through the pain. This works ideally for new capabilities and things that haven't been done before.

AI: Does ChatGPT dream of electric sheep?

You're not hallucinating: there's absolutely nothing being hyped up more frequently or more fervently than AI. For data leaders, the opportunity lies in getting some of that sweet AI hype to focus on data. Leaders feel that they've seen some wins in this area.

One said, "If we're talking about Skynet, we better be able to get our sales data organized."

Leaders are seeing wins all over the place with generative AI; it's saving them time and greatly increasing their output. There's a surge in ML and AI applications. However, genAI works best with humans in the loop. Unchecked, it often falls flat as a complete deliverable.

One leader came up with three rules for genAI. These are:

01 It's a co-pilot

02 Don't trust what sounds factual

03 Don't misrepresent

> **Vendors are creating beautiful products and there's tons of innovation.**

Technology as the beating heart of the data ecosystem

At the heart of it all lies the technology that is processing, sorting, and analyzing data. Technology gets people excited and incentivized. One leader said, "Vendors are creating beautiful products and there's tons of innovation." Technology is growing ever more scalable, and there's no need to reinvent the wheel for every organization.

Leaders feel that the modern data stack is doing a great job; there's no competitive advantage to doing in-house development. Professional services provided by the vendor work, because the vendors know the product inside and out. While the buyer needs to be part of the implementation process and own it going forward, specialists aren't usually required. This status quo makes hiring easier.
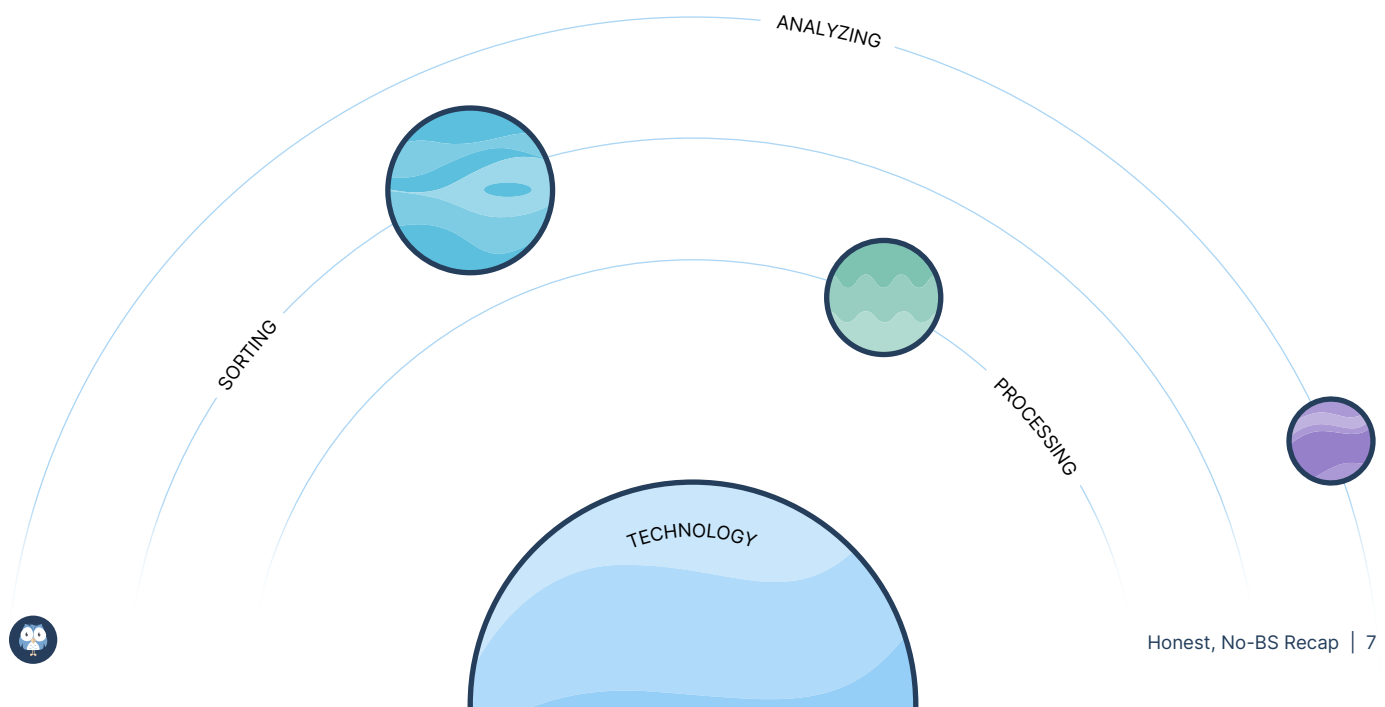
What didn't work in 2023

As well as sharing wins, there was plenty of open discussion on pain points and challenges. Let's take a look at some of the challenges data leaders faced in 2023.

When the data quality isn't so quality

Leaders face persistent challenges with data reliability and data quality. One leader mentioned that "You can't get away from putting in bad data." If teams are only as good as their data, it's frustrating when bad data skews the data model and impacts both internal teams and external stakeholders.

There is so much noise in the tech space. From a plethora of tools to organizational silos, it can be difficult to find high-quality data and troubleshoot for low-quality data when it surfaces.

> **You can't get away from putting in bad data.**

In some cases, leaders feel they can't solve basic problems because of bureaucracy and a lack of data standardization. Pair that with a lack of data education and accountability, and you're looking at some downright low-quality data practices.

Data as a general philosophy

What is data? Should one team be in charge of it? Should everyone? Who is responsible for it, and when, and via what mechanisms?

Data leaders spoke on the lack of clear expectations around the people who work with data but don't have an official "data" title. If "data" isn't in their job description, they don't necessarily understand why they should care about data. How do leaders convince them that they should?

Data isn't always valued as a general asset. People can see furniture, for example, and know that it is an asset. It exists, someone made it, someone bought it. But "data" isn't always so tangible. It can be difficult to "sell" a CFO on the value of data governance, or data quality, or data management.

With different teams taking different stances on what exactly data means to them, it can be difficult to achieve alignment.

Lonely data silos

Teams are getting good work done. But if good work happens in a silo, did it happen at all? It's challenging to look at data holistically. Maybe organizations don't have the technical capacity, or the headcount, or the justification. That leads to a lack of storytelling. Sometimes the data has trouble communicating all that it could or should. Then you have the general cooling effect of delaying time-to-insight.

Further, when departments don't work together, data is duplicated and siloed. Sometimes individuals don't want to give up control of their data, so they drill further down into their silos. Systems built in silos aren't likely to talk to each other.

Plus, infrastructure teams can be a bottleneck, and data teams are swamped. If they can't make the case for prioritizing their initiatives, they get stuck in a frustrating status quo.

DATA SILO 1   DATA SILO 2   DATA SILO 3   DATA SILO 4   DATA SILO 5   DATA SILO 6

To govern, or not to govern?

Some organizations tend to be fear-based when it comes to making data decisions. To avoid risk, data decisions may get tied up in legal departments, leading to procrastination and deprioritization.

Do individuals speak the language of data? "Data governance," "data literacy," these terms may seem obvious to data professionals. But to the uninitiated, they sound strange. Am I illiterate? Are we talking about the government? It can be confusing.

There is a lack of shared language when it comes to data. One leader noted that some feel they "need a PhD to understand the complex network of the data landscape in order to do analytics over the gap between the technical and business."

Further, it's not always easy to obtain the budget for data governance. It's not "sexy." But it is critical in the drive toward AI-ready data. Technical people sometimes aren't eloquent making the case for their initiatives; when it comes to data governance that's no exception.

Governance can be a quagmire for organizations. Regulations mean they need to store data, but data storage is very expensive. So is investing in data quality and data cleanup, after the fact. So it's on data leaders and technical teams to make the case for data governance initiatives.

Organizations should care about data governance, but it's not always the first order of business since it's not always directly tied to outcomes. If executives see governance as a cost center, they won't be willing to invest in it. Furthermore, if governance is piecemeal, and happens only project by project, it's less effective.

Just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

AI gone wild

"Just because you can, doesn't mean you should." Wise words for a world being swept away on the waves of the AI craze. AI must be deployed, assuredly. But it must be deployed strategically, and productively, and in a way that actually helps teams achieve their KPIs. The speed of change is difficult for anyone to keep pace with, even the most tech-savvy among us.

Leaders noted that the risks of AI with data include things like:

- Not having the required data lineage for truly AI-ready data
- Cataloging data is really hard and teams don't know what they have
- Hiring the right people to usher AI into the fold
- A lack of guardrails around letting AI loose within an organization; sweeping changes ensue, some of them almost entirely unconsidered and unplanned
- AI being seen as "cheating" versus being seen as productive and time-saving
- Unknown unknowns: What are the ethical considerations we haven't considered yet?

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Final thoughts...

Data isn't simple. It isn't one thing or another; it's often both sides of the coin. Is there buy-in for data? Yes, and no. Is a higher volume of data creating more clarity for business leaders? Yes and no. The complexity of data will often outpace our ability to understand it. We will always be playing catch up.

So we need to focus on asking the right questions; the ones that the business doesn't know they need to ask. We need to continually work toward business-aligned data strategies. The keys here are a strong data culture and purposeful data initiatives. And, of course, staying #HonestNoBS.

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