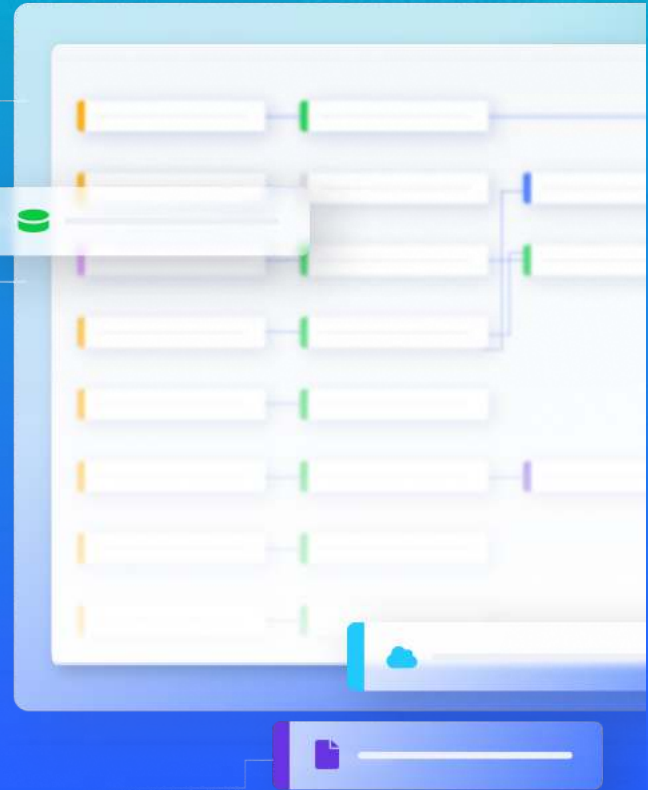




REPORT

# Winning Over the C-Suite: How to Talk to CEOs About Data

Lay the foundation for a truly  
data-driven business culture



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# Introduction

We are in the age of data. Regardless of industry or company size, data is one of a business's most valuable assets. Most CEOs know that a strong data program is required for long-term success, yet many programs fail to fulfill their promise and potential.

While 76% of business leaders say their company is striving to create a data culture, just 34% of businesses are now partially or purely data-driven in their decision-making. What is holding them back? Culture. Up to 79% of leaders cited "cultural factors"—people or processes—as the primary barriers to creating data-driven enterprises.

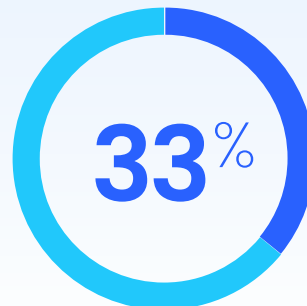
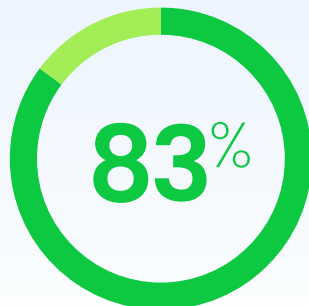
The issues start at the top. While 83% of executives want their businesses to be more data-driven, only 33% are comfortable questioning the KPIs and metrics used in their organizations, and just 29% of executives are asked to communicate with data-driven methods. Despite the lag in turning data aspirations into reality, the desire for change persists.

In today's business landscape, the C-suite is expected to have the skills to lead effectively and leverage data to make impactful decisions.

The path to a successful data program begins with communication. For most companies, that means IT teams will be responsible for helping CEOs understand the business value of their data and the investment required to leverage data effectively. Changing company culture isn't easy, but with the right strategies, IT can win over the C-suite—and the trust of the entire organization.

As data transformation pioneers, we have front-row seats to how the most innovative companies around the globe are leveraging their data. We've synthesized our own insights with those from experts in our network to develop a guide on how to talk effectively to leadership about data—and start conversations that lead to big change.

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# How we got here

When it comes to building the data foundation of most businesses, Gable CEO Chad Sanderson offers this maxim: “You can be fast, you can be cheap, or you can be good. But you only get to pick two.” The likely root cause of data problems for most businesses is rapid growth, he says. “Leadership wanted a report on something, for example, and they didn’t care how it got done—they just wanted it ASAP. That’s how it starts. They want it fast and, of course, they want it cheap—which means it isn’t any good.”

Over time, “quick and dirty” becomes the rule rather than the exception. Businesses may get by this way for years, but eventually the cracks start to show. “It’s like a kid wearing high-water pants to school. It works. But it looks bad, and you’ve definitely outgrown them,” says Matt Florian, Cloud Analytics Practice Director at COMERIT.

In a landscape where the most forward-looking businesses are applying data at every level to become smarter and leaner, companies with reactive, less effective data programs start to lose their competitive edge. Despite mounting disadvantages, a complete overhaul of any data

program is an intimidating, potentially expensive task—so businesses hesitate, staying in reaction mode instead of proactively solving their data shortcomings.

Companies need to shift their shortsighted data strategies to produce a more connected, strategic data ecosystem that is capable of delivering business value long term. “The data program can’t be tactical—it has to be strategic,” says Kent Graziano, owner and founder of Data Warrior LLC and a Coalesce strategic advisor, adding that it must do more than solve individual problems as they arise.

Strategic no longer means “slow.” New software, automations, and approaches to data management are changing how enterprises source, treat, and apply their data, mitigating the tension between IT and business and creating new pathways for collaboration. That collaboration can be accelerated through clear, candid conversation. Don’t know where to start? We’ve outlined guidelines to help you make the case for data in your organization.



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**KENT GRAZIANO**

OWNER AND FOUNDER, DATA WARRIOR LLC

# Become a data storyteller

“Stories are powerful,” says Michael Tantrum, national sales director for Resultant. “They touch on pain points, and they bring hope.” But words aren’t the only vehicle for triggering emotion and driving action. “Data storytelling” is an emerging business practice that leverages visualization and communication tactics to turn raw data into compelling stories, making it more engaging and resonant.

We’re in a new era of IT, wherein to be successful, data scientists must be able to turn their data into stories that translate complex concepts, statistical models, and a massive amount of information into findings that are easy to understand, memorable, and actionable. For maximum effect, these stories must resonate throughout the organization, especially in the C-Suite, if you want to develop a true-data driven company culture.

Statistics and endless cells of numbers in spreadsheets can be difficult to grasp, because our brains are wired to process information that can be seen and readily applied to real-world situations.

As such, data concepts can be difficult to digest for people who aren’t skilled in data science. Data storytelling is a practical approach that bridges gaps in data literacy, illuminating both the “what” and “why” of any data problem. “The modern data person has to be more human-centric than in the past—that means becoming a storyteller,” says Tantrum.

## To be an effective data storyteller, you must:

- Understand the data literacy level of your audience.
- Decide how much technical detail to provide.
- Understand the problem clearly.
- Lean into visualizations and user-friendly dashboards.
- Make solutions action-oriented.
- Offer step-by-step explanations for how you reached a conclusion.
- Be able to defend how you arrived at your conclusions.



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**MICHAEL TANTRUM**

NATIONAL SALES DIRECTOR, RESULTANT

# Focus on growth

“The first and most important thing you can do to drive a meaningful conversation is to start with this question: ‘What is your five- to seven-year growth plan?’” COMERIT’s Florian says. “Because no matter what the growth plan is, the insight you get—and every discussion you have about data after—is then tied to the growth of the company.”

A data initiative is strategic and must operate at the enterprise level; it is not a one-and-done project. It can help to frame conversations about the data program in the context of long-term growth. When a data program is conceptualized as a central strategy that drives growth, its importance can’t be minimized and it becomes part of the vision for the entire organization.

Florian also notes that if the business is publicly traded, conversations about data’s role in revenue growth can be linked to executive bonuses. “Tying the conversation to something that personally benefits CEOs can get you a closer listen. Even if they don’t understand the intricacies of the data, the conversation instantly becomes different and more of a collaboration.”



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**MATT FLORIAN**

CLOUD ANALYTICS PRACTICE DIRECTOR, COMERIT

# Quick wins for big impact

“Every company has a data product or two that is important to them,” Chad Sanderson says. “Those are the items that drive ROI. Start by addressing the foundations of those. Focusing on the data that is most important is a great way to begin the change process.”

Transforming a data program often starts by transforming the pipelines for specific, valuable data products. Sanderson suggests mapping the data lineage for those items first. “Take that graph to your CEO,” he says. “Reiterate the ROI of that product and point out where the company is incurring risk in the data supply chain.” Risk usually stems from a lack of ownership, communication, management, or visibility at various pipeline stages. The conversation can then become directed and action-oriented, focusing on reorganizing and improving that unique product.

“You’re not asking them to completely restructure the program,” Sanderson points out. But evaluating a single product can create a case study that illustrates why data quality and lineage are important, while securing a quick win that shows the impact of the restructuring and builds momentum.

“You can only spend so much time in the planning phase for transformation of a data program,” Florian says. “You have to get in there, get the quick wins, find out what works and what doesn’t for your culture, and then grow from there, refining and executing again.”



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**CHAD SANDERSON**  
CEO, GABLE

# Keep the conversation going

Every data engineer knows that the answer to one question can create dozens more additional questions. The pace of business is accelerating, and so is the modern data program.

“Things change quickly now,” Kent Graziano says. Gone are the days of checking off a to-do list over the course of several months. “By the time you check off a priority item, the list you started with won’t matter anymore. When you work like that, you’re put in a position where you have to justify the data program’s existence, because what you accomplished didn’t deliver any business value.” The antidote to survival mode? An iterative approach born out of ongoing dialogue.

“You have to create a data environment that is adaptable to whatever analytic requirements will come up tomorrow, next month, next year,” Tantrum says. Luckily, modern data tools help to

support agility and a steady back and forth between business and IT. “Tools like Coalesce keep the conversation moving forward by allowing you to rapidly do prototype iterations and build up data requirements as you go. If for whatever reason you can’t answer a question right now, you can do it within minutes or hours as opposed to months.”

Ongoing dialogue is part of the mental shift that happens when IT communicates more effectively with CEOs. “Right now, it’s like everyone has their own black box,” Sanderson says. “But we have to stop thinking of data as a dashboard and instead think of it as a process. And we must give everyone visibility and the ability to meaningfully participate in the process.”



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# Start today

The more that problematic data moves through pipelines with limited visibility, the more data products are impacted, incurring risk while hurting competitiveness. Simultaneously, top IT minds are doomed to menial tasks such as processing data for projects that may not deliver long-term business value.

To stay adaptable, data programs and businesses need tools, philosophies, and techniques that support success. In the dynamic world in which businesses operate today, data must keep up. “You need infrastructure that is set up well and is highly agile,” Tantrum says. “The traditional approach doesn’t work anymore. What does that mean? It means you need automation. What does automation look like? It looks like Coalesce.”

Platforms like Coalesce open up new possibilities across the enterprise by enabling faster and easier iteration. They can support deep collaboration with your executives, and the rest of the business, through intuitive graphical interfaces that give as much technical detail as necessary without compromising usability, so anyone can use relevant dashboards. Alongside advanced visualization, standardized and automated code eliminates the need for legacy knowledge and breaks down silos, accelerating development no matter who is in charge.

Driving change requires that CEOs understand data well enough to trust it, use it to make decisions, and tell their own stories. IT leaders have a unique opportunity to shape the future of their organizations by starting—and continuing—the conversations that improve data literacy so data can deliver more business value than ever before.



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Founded in 2020, Coalesce is the only data transformation platform built for scale. Coalesce combines the speed of an intuitive graphical user interface (GUI), the flexibility of code, and the efficiency of automation, empowering its customers with increased data team productivity and insights. Based in San Francisco, Calif., Coalesce supports customers worldwide and is backed by Emergence Capital, 11.2 Capital, GreatPoint Ventures, and Industry Ventures.

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