



LEADERSHIP AND TEAM FORMATION IN DATA GOVERNANCE: A ROADMAP FOR SUCCESS



The success of a data governance program relies on the people who execute it. The most successful programs have strong leadership, great people, alignment, commitment, and execution focus. To achieve this, leadership is required at all levels of the data organization.

Sponsorship and the Foundation of a Data Governance Program

Many consulting organizations, evangelists, and data theorists claim that successful organizations must have a charter, a chief data officer, and a C-level sponsor. These things are great to have, but many organizations can be successful without them but operate with a groundswell of support at the doer level. Before we dive in, here are the chief people and terms in your program:

Chief data officer (CDO) — [CIO Magazine defines the CDO](#) as the person who oversees a range of data-related functions to ensure the organization is getting the most from what could be its most valuable asset. The CDO should be a senior executive responsible for the utilization and governance of data across the organization. Be careful not to confuse the chief *data* officer with the chief *digital* officer, who can also be referred to as the CDO. It is critical to realize that the main role of the CDO is to sell the importance of data, promote the building of a data culture, and increase data literacy across the organization.

Data governance charter — A charter is the data version of the traditional project management charter. PMBOK (*The Project Management Book of Knowledge*) defines a project charter as a document issued by senior management that formally authorizes the existence of a project. It provides the project manager the authority to apply organizational resources to

project activities. Likewise, a data governance charter is issued by the CDO, leadership, or a data governance council to do the same for a data program. A [PMO-style charter](#) can be helpful.

Data sponsor — The person responsible for championing the purpose of data, aligning executive support, and helping to fulfill funding needs. They often motivate leadership and help guide the data program.

Top-down execution — The idea that a data governance program will start with a data sponsor, then build out staff, support structure, approaches, etc. It's important to note that top-down execution starts with executive buy-in.

Bottom-up approach — The alternative approach to top-down execution. The bottom-up approach is when a data governance program starts at the grassroots level and is based on addressing some specific challenges, then expands to drive things forward.

Middling for success — The idea of starting with a bottom-up approach to drive and prove success in the area needed, and once the program is successful, obtain a high-level sponsor to grow the program with executive support, increased funding, and organizational alignment.

A Practical Framework, Not a Voluminous Charter

Many firms find it challenging to escape the idea of a comprehensive charter that consolidates vital information for data governance. Unfortunately, they rarely reap the intended benefits of such a lengthy charter, which tends to be a check-box exercise distracting from the rollout of a successful data governance set of capabilities:

“Alation has a very pragmatic approach, which has really expanded the benefit of the time we spend with our GSI (Global System Integrator).”

Paul Martin
Data Security & Governance Manager, SLB

As a part of an Alation data governance rollout, the data governance charter is downplayed, and a focus on a data governance framework drives the establishment of a set of core ideas recorded in a pitch deck.

While some firms use a deck that can have as many as 80 slides, only 8 to 10 slides are sufficient to describe the framework, people, roadmap, and promotion plans for the program.



The pitch deck should include:

- **Elevator pitch** — A short (6–10 word) summary of the goals of your data governance program.
- **Vision** — A well-documented and inspiring declaration outlining the long-term aspirations and future direction of your data. Because data initiatives move quickly, “long-term” should be defined as 2 years.
- **Mission** — The core activities over the next 6 months to progress toward achieving the vision. Display these as bullets to increase actionability.
- **SMART goals** — A set of goals assigned to key staff to execute the mission and move toward realizing the vision. These should include who owns each point, and when they are due.
- **Project plan** — A fleshed-out and detailed set of specific tasks, mapped out over time and used for project management
- **Data governance roadmap** — A high-level picture of key initiatives, and how they will emerge over the next 2–3 years, used to build consensus and further the program.
- **Organizational chart** — A breakdown of how key data resources are spread across the company. It can take many forms, but is meant to build consensus by identifying all the stakeholders. This is described in detail below.

- **RACI** — A detailed list specifying involvement and ownership throughout the data governance program:
 - R = Responsible
 - A = Accountable
 - C = Consulted
 - I = Informed

Bringing these items together highlights one of the most critical elements of a data governance program, namely selling:

“As a data governance leader, I am always selling.”

John Moran

Senior Director, Enterprise Data Governance, Thermo Fisher Scientific

Remember to keep the tone positive! Avoid focusing on the “bad” things that can happen without data governance. Fearmongering rarely excites people about data and won’t help obtain the funding a firm needs to invest in data. Instead, you can mention some of the more challenging areas of data, but stay optimistic, with a lens on data’s value and benefits.

Organizational Charts Offer Structure and Accountability

Gwen Thomas, founder of the Data Governance Institute, once recommended against drafting an [organizational chart](#) because you want people working together and not focused on a rigid hierarchy of leaders and subordinates. However, most people do want a resource listing the stakeholders and those responsible for driving data initiatives. To that end, we recommend three different types of organizational charts:

1. **Strategic vision** — no names, but ways to illustrate what departments and roles are involved
2. **Traditional organizational chart** — a chart listing the broader data governance group of resources by department, including names
3. **Key role table** — a table listing key roles by department, with names of the people involved, including management

The People Powering Data Governance Programs

In rolling out a data governance program, it is easy to see that data programs take a traditional people, process, and technology approach. All three elements are important, but it's the people driving the programs who have the most impact on their success.

The CDO

The CDO is the tip of the data governance spear who sells (and continues selling) the benefits of data. They evangelize the importance of data literacy, and strive to establish a data culture. It is critical that they are involved in the establishment, rollout, and execution of the data governance program.

The best CDOs can sell, bring people together, and celebrate successes while building teams to address data challenges. Often, the CDO drives the strategic leadership-level discussions that will be executed by the enterprise data steward and stewardship team.

Your Data Governance Team

In rolling out a data governance program, it is easy to see that data programs are a classical people, process, and technology approach. To be successful, you need to have process, and technology but without people it is destined to fail.

Traditional Stewardship Roles

Data stewards are leaders in their own right. There are many ways to organize the people in a data, but it's vital to identify those people leading, influencing, and delivering on data for decision-making and progress. Alation has leveraged the main roles that David Plotkin documents in [*Data Stewardship: An Actionable Guide to Effective Data Management and Data Governance*](#).



Plotkin defines types of data stewards about which Alation educates its customers. Remarkably, nearly all firms are surprised by some of these roles. Keep in mind that these data stewardship roles often are part of the job, not the job itself:

- **Business data stewards** — The key personnel leading and performing much of the data work to ensure it's available, accurate, trusted, and used properly. They are the most difficult people to replace because they often have the deepest knowledge of the organization's inner workings. Business data stewards roles can be broken down into three key areas: business alignment, data lifecycle management, data quality/improvement.

(Note: Alation tends to view the role of an operational data steward as part of the business data steward role, or as part of functional staff.)

- **Technical data stewards** — The business-savvy technical resources, sometimes but not always in IT, who both build out new capabilities in partnership with the business data stewards but also address three core capability areas to provide:
 1. Technical expertise around data pipelines (ETL, ELT, custom code, etc.) that support data platforms, BI tools, and other technological capabilities
 2. Understanding and knowledge of the wide range of operational and analytical systems that an enterprise possesses
 3. Support in identifying where data sits within the wide range of systems
- **Enterprise data stewards** — The one or two people running the day-to-day operations of a data program. With a firm grasp of the strategic direction of the entire organization, they know the key personnel among the business and technical data stewards, and identify the organization's subject matter experts. They are often the right hand of the CDO, and are tasked with driving the CDO's vision.
- **Compliance data stewards** — These exist in some heavily regulated industries, and their primary responsibility is monitoring and driving compliance activities. Sometimes some of this responsibility falls to the business data steward, but in some businesses the amount of work is too much for the business data steward alone.

Other Stewardship Roles

There are other stewardship roles that some companies or data organizations require:

- **Project stewards** — Business data stewards reassigned from their usual role to focus on a specific project. Once the project is completed, they return to their original role. This is particularly important during M&A (merger and acquisition), replatforming, or addressing critical business problems.
- **Domain stewards** — Business data stewards aligned with data related to a specific class such as customers, products, suppliers, or HR. They have the same responsibilities as a business data steward, only with that class of data.
- **Data custodians** — A role that exists in finance and some other businesses. The data custodian can be the administrator of a data platform, own infrastructure, or have many of the same responsibilities as a technical data steward. Outside of finance, fewer firms use data custodians today.
- **Data owner** — The leader assigned to own a certain set or class of data. They make all final decisions, and drive the use of that data forward. Some firms use this title, while others focus on business data stewards owning the data (with their managers making final decisions).



The Data Owner and Data Ownership

Alation tends to focus on data ownership, rather than whether to have specific “data owner” roles. This decision is up to the organization, and is influenced by the rigidity of its organizational structure. What is absolutely critical is establishing data ownership. Often, it isn’t so easy to assign an object to a single business data steward. You may want to have a set of data stewards or, more commonly, a data set may need to have ownership established at a column or attribute level.

Specifying the ownership of data is a critical task not to be taken lightly.

The Broader Data Organization

Data governance teams, or data teams, can employ a wider range of organizational structures, from centralized to massively distributed. This can be influenced by the overall way an enterprise is formed, which includes answering the following questions:

1. What countries is an enterprise operating in?
2. What languages and currencies need to be managed?
3. Are there one or multiple organizations such as agencies, businesses, or strategic business units?
4. What functions and functional organizations make up the enterprise?
5. What technology platforms exist, and how many? This can be both operational and analytical applications.

Many data teams that tried in the past to have more distributed teams faced resistance from managers overly focused on restrictive governance. This all changed with the advancement of the [data mesh architecture](#).

Data Governance Councils and Committees

One critical component to successful data-driven organizations is establishing councils that meet regularly, have the reign remit, and share documents on open communication, collaboration, alignment, and direction. The most mature organizations often have three or more levels of councils, including:

1. **Data Governance Council** — The tactical group of lead doers or champions that make things happen. They often span organizational and functional boundaries and are a birds-of-a-feather organization. They often meet weekly, are very well managed, and are both respected and highly motivated to make data right and celebrate success.
2. **Steering Council** — The group that meets monthly, stays in touch with the progress the data governance council is making, and is aware of execution priorities and mandates. They play a middle ground to share perspectives and help with promotion of the value of data.

3. **Executive Council** — The more senior staff, who are the senior consumers of data progress. They meet quarterly, listen to high-level summary updates and are always available to provide their opinions and help with direction when needed. They are to whom the other councils are selling, and help set the stage for progress. The best data cultures have executive committees that are engaged, help with funding, and really see the benefits of data.
4. **+ Committee** — Most firms do very well with the above three committee levels, but when unique needs surface, a “+ committee” — a special-purpose tiger team — is formed to address them.

“We spin up small cross-functional teams, address the need, and then spin them down to move on to the next thing. We do this all the time and it makes a real difference.”

Senior Data Trust Leader in the Healthcare Industry

Data Mesh and Decentralization

The onset of data mesh has made a profound impact on the organizational structures of data stewardship. It provided much-needed support to the idea of distributed data stewardship teams. Data governance teams were traditionally formed around a big central team. This was occasionally supported by some master data teams that would own and maintain a set of data, and which were often limited to customer, products, or strategic sourcing.

Once data mesh was introduced and the idea of federated governance took root, there was more widespread adoption of distributed data governance. Data governance leaders introduced federated governance and sought ways to make it work. The real benefit of distributed governance was having the data operations happening close to where the data was used — a huge benefit to all functions in all businesses.

Distributed organization provides organizations of all sizes with additional key benefits:

- **Accessibility** — Because data experts work closely with them or as part of their team, staff are more likely to ask for help, provide inputs, assist others, and work together to address business problems.
- **Understanding** — Data stewards close to the business action bring an increased understanding of what is going on, and they are better equipped to fix any problems.
- **Maintaining your best staff** — There are already many people doing these data tasks. Why risk moving them into another organization and lose their capabilities for their current business function?
- **Collaboration** — There's more participation and partnership when you have close colleagues addressing data challenges. Further, by having a virtual team that spans many groups and skill sets, firms find that data can be the first place where cross-functional collaboration occurs.

Conclusion: The Power of the People

You can employ the most cutting-edge tools, develop the smoothest process, and even incorporate AI and automate many tasks, but in the end, people are the key to the success of your data governance programs. They need to be involved, demonstrate leadership qualities, and move the ball on data initiatives. Establishing a set of personas around data governance — identifying the business-focused tactical stewards, assigning the technically focused staff, and aligning ownership of data with process/policies and technology — is the winning recipe.

Then, form the data governance councils that do the work, steer the ship, and act as executive champions.

Remember, a data-driven culture happens only with the universal belief that data matters.