

# One Simple Question

## The Case for Data Governance

### This book has one big idea:

Companies are doomed to Data Disasters unless managers at all levels add one step to their decision-making process for certain kinds of data-related decisions. They must ask whether they can safely make a traditional "management decision" or whether they should invoke Data Governance.

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**D**ata Disasters don't have to happen. Tapes containing private customer information don't have to be lost, stolen, or unprotected. Companies don't have to inadvertently display millions of pieces of sensitive data – or be duped into giving this information away to criminals. Pilots don't have to run planes into the ground while arguing over one piece of data but ignoring flashing lights and alarms representing other key information. Big decisions – business strategy

choices, war and shuttle launch go/no-go decisions – don't have to be based on wrong data, or withheld data, or misunderstood data. Company execs don't have to make critical decisions based on bad input that they have trusted to be adequate and balanced input.

## When Data Disasters do happen,

we want to know why. *Who made the decision?* we ask. *Who's in charge? Who's the top dog, the buck-stops-here guy, the leader of the pack, the Alpha Male? Who should we blame?*



Sometimes leaders are to blame – because they refuse to hear information or because they're bad at making choices. But more often, it's unfair to blame the leader. After all, decisions are only as good as the input that goes into them.

And that's the problem. The basic decision-input pattern learned in Management exercises – the pattern that has become second nature to managers – simply doesn't work for many data-related decisions. It is worse than ineffective. It is *mal-effective*. Decision makers who automatically choose this pattern are courting Data Disasters.

**So what's a leader to do?** It's simple: require that an appropriate process be followed by those who provide or receive input to decisions.

Is it that simple? Yes. Is it also hard? It can be. Changing an unconscious habit can be very difficult. Also, those who are required to collect boundary-

spanning input from many branches and levels of the corporate org chart may resist, citing political barriers and the perception that asking for information could be seen as a weakness.

**But there's a lot at stake.** We must all understand the reality of our inter-connected, data-driven world: Our organizations are doomed to the occasional data disaster unless decision-makers at all levels insist on receiving the answer to one simple question before they make data-related decisions.

**Why** is this? The explanation has three parts.

1. Leaders and managers in organizations operate on both training and instinct. One of these instincts – a very strong one – is the Alpha Male Instinct. It's actually a collection of ten instincts, or urgings, such as *be competitive; be decisive (even if you're not sure where you're going); don't show weakness; organize your troops into hierarchies of loyal managers and staff who will be loyal to your agendas.*

The Alpha Male Instinct is important, and often it serves both the organization and the individual well. Following the urgings of the Alpha Male Instinct can be effective and can lead to great results. HOWEVER... sometimes doing what this instinct urges results in a seeming success (the manager gets what he/she is trying to get) but also in huge and unexpected problems. In this case, following the Alpha Male Instinct is not exactly *ineffective*. Rather, following the instinct's urgings is *mal-effective*.

2. Succumbing to the urgings of the Alpha Male Instinct is often mal-effective when making data-related decisions, simply because data in today's organizations isn't contained in separate little boxes of corporate org charts. It flows through the enterprise. Some data-related decisions, therefore, require input from many branches of the organization (and from many levels) if we are to both meet the decision-maker's immediate needs and also avoid creating new problems for other business groups or for the enterprise's ability to meet legal, compliance, security, and quality requirements.

If managers blindly follow all the urgings of the Alpha Male Instinct, taking input from only their branch of the org chart and not showing weakness to "competitors" in other branches of the org chart, they will miss out on key input. Often this will result in only small problems, inefficiencies, and organizational strife. But sometimes the lack of just one input area can result in a data disaster.

3. Managers making data-related decisions can avoid disasters by answering one simple question: *Should I be using my default decision-making pattern or a different one?*

Notice the question has nothing to do with power and politics and hierarchies. It is totally unreasonable to expect participants in a politically-charged environment (which most organizations are) to quit thinking in terms of power and hierarchies when they make management decisions. But it is reasonable to expect all our

decision-makers to know the difference between management and governance.

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## What *is* the difference between management and governance?

### **What Data Governance is**

Data Governance refers to the organizational bodies, rules, decision rights, and accountabilities of people and information systems as they perform information-related processes.

*Data Governance sets the rules of engagement that Management will follow as the organization uses data.*

### **What Data Governance does**


(the three missions of Data Governance)

- 1) Proactively define/align rules
- 2) Reactively resolve issues arising from non-compliance with rules
- 3) Provide ongoing, boundary-spanning services to data stakeholders.

definitions from  
The Universal Data Governance Framework™

We'll devote a chapter to describing the three essential missions of any type of governance, and show how they are provided by Data Governance. We'll show the relationship between this form of governance and other types that exist within today's organizations.

We'll demonstrate that it can be a VERY SIMPLE matter to understand and apply Data Governance in your organization; the key is to refrain from jumping into concepts and terminology that only your data experts will understand.

<b>U.S. Governance</b> 	
Legislative branch	rule-making
Executive branch	implementation & providing services
Judicial branch	issue resolution

Using the familiar model of the three branches of the U.S. government and their missions, we demonstrate how easy it can be (if you and your staff allow it) to arrive at a common understanding of what governance means for your unique

organization. The universal framework presents a generic pattern of how roles and groups work together; you can use it to decide what's right for you.

**Along the way**, we'll point out governance mechanisms typically in place in most organizations (even if they aren't labeled as such). We'll talk about how they are a little bit different from each other and from management and stewardship mechanisms.

We'll reinforce why managing and governing data can't always follow the same patterns we use to manage or govern IT and projects and the people who hang from the branches of the corporate org chart.

We'll help your organization's leaders, managers, and staff understand the patterns they're following to make decisions – and the choices that are open to them – so they can make more conscious choices and avoid data disasters.

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**This book is not** an academic tome. This is not a heavy read. Most chapters are easier reads than this introduction. They avoid the technical jargon found in most articles in data management publications – even the articles I've written that were focused toward a technical audience.

**The one big idea in this book is** an idea that applies equally to business management and technical management. It applies equally to executives, mid-level managers, and staff.

This one idea is actually pretty simple, but like many simple ideas, it can be overlooked during the rush and bustle of becoming business leaders, technical experts, managers of people and projects.

This book brings us all back – together – to square one, where we can all discover (or remember) a simple, but big idea that will make our lives easier and will protect our organizations from costly and embarrassing problems.

## This one big idea deals with

a set of behaviors that are baked into the modern corporate landscape. The behaviors – which are effective in some instances but dangerously mal-effective in others – are a natural outgrowth of an instinct that has been around since the dawn of humanity.



We come at the idea from several perspectives. In the first section, *The Problem*, we look at the reality of how data works in organizations now that we have the technology and desire to build interconnected systems. We look at the Alpha Male Instinct, a mostly unconscious thought pattern at work within most managers. We look at how succumbing to the urgings of this instinct at the wrong time can lead to data disasters.

We talk about other types of programs and efforts that many organizations have adopted, and how they might/might not help avoid data disasters.

We introduce a simple, universal model for Data Governance and the resources involved in meeting its missions: People & Organizational Structures; Policy; Processes; Technology; Information; Communications.

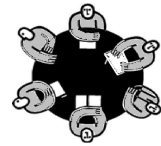


## In the second section

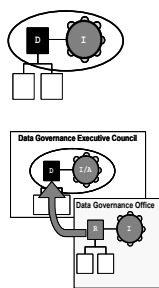
of the book, we look at the solution. We ask: How do we find focus? We meet an organization whose mantra of "No Orange Jumpsuits!" enabled a small group to accomplish great things quickly.

In this section we ask: How much governance do we need? We look at what Data Governance might look like in your organization. We talk about how easy life would be if we had a Help Desk for data-related issues, and we describe what it would take to get one in place, simply and quickly.

We ask and answer: How can we align organizational efforts so you get more out this effort than you put into it? How do we avoid creating bottlenecks?



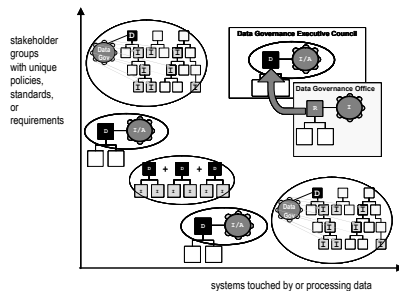
We meet some interesting characters with some lighthearted lessons to teach us. I 'fess up to my middle name and share the story behind it.



**In the next section,** we look at decision rights and stakeholders. We identify potential triggers for governance. We talk about how to make change easy for your decision-making managers and staff as we ask them to add just one simple step to their existing management processes.

We identify the "usual suspects" – data stakeholders who are typically involved in making decisions or providing input for boundary-spanning data-related concerns.

We help your managers move from unconscious patterns and instincts to



conscious choices, as we depict patterns of decision-making and decision-input that they can choose from.



We visit some more fun characters – Scotty the Welshman, Carnac the Magnificent, a boy who refused to ask permission – and see how dealing with data really isn't so different from dealing with life.

In the fourth section of the book, we talk about communicating the value of



Data Governance to the rest of the organization. We learn the *Carrot, Carrot, Carrot, Stick!* message and other rhetorical patterns.

We talk about metaphors, stories, and heroes as we learn something important about data and corporations from a memorable reading of Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.



I share a family story about Grandpa and the Mobster and how a few sentences uttered in a mafia den in Chicago in the 1940s have relevance to working with corporate data today.

In the last section of the book, we look at alternate points of view. Do you actually need a formal Data Governance program? Does the

adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" apply to you? If you do need to become more formal, what specific things should your teams put into place right now?

## We end by looking at *The Data Users' Bill of Rights.*

This simple document addresses the rights of those who use or rely upon information.



It can be used by an executive who needs to gauge the quality of information that will be used as input for a key decision. It can be used by a Data Warehouse team in need of a dialogue with those who feed data into the warehouse. It can be used by anyone working with data who wants to understand the questions they should be able to answer for any of their stakeholders.

*The Data Users' Bill of Rights* outlines what **you have the right to know** about:

- the meaning and shape of the data that comes to you
- what risks to the information have not been completely eliminated by those providing it to you, and
- what people/agendas were involved in resolving issues and risks as the data found its way to you.

So there's the book. Let's begin.

