DATA ANALYTICS · BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

From Dashboards to Decisions

Most analytics ends at a dashboard nobody acts on. Building analytics that change what people actually do — and measuring whether it did.

Data Analytics · Business Intelligence

Walk into most organizations and you will find dashboards everywhere and decisions nowhere. Screens of charts, refreshed nightly, admired occasionally, acted on rarely. The analytics function measures its success in dashboards shipped and data pipelines built. The organization measures nothing, because nothing it does changed. The gap between those two scoreboards is the subject of this paper.

The unit of value is a decision

“So what?”

The question every dashboard must answer, and most cannot. If nothing changes, it is decoration.

Artheus test

Decision

The real unit of analytics value — not the chart, but the choice it changes.

Artheus principle

Action

What separates a report from an outcome. No action, no impact.

Artheus principle

A dashboard is not a decision

A dashboard is a display. It shows what is happening. It does not, by itself, tell anyone what to do about it, whose job it is to do it, or whether doing it worked. Those are the parts that create value, and they are exactly the parts a dashboard leaves out. The result is a familiar organizational artifact: a beautiful screen that everyone has seen and no one has used to make a different choice.

Why more charts do not help

The instinct when a dashboard is not used is to add to it — another metric, another filter, another view. This makes the problem worse. Information without a decision attached is cognitive load, not insight. The people who could act are now busier, not better informed, and the one number that would have changed their choice is buried among twenty that will not. More is the enemy here. The discipline is subtraction toward the decision that matters.

Decision-first analytics

The fix is to build backwards from the choice, not forwards from the data. Before a single chart is designed, four questions have to have answers:

- **What decision is this for?** Name the specific choice a specific person makes — not a topic, a decision.
- **Who owns it?** A decision with no owner is a report. Name the person who will act.
- **What action does it trigger?** Define, in advance, what different values mean the owner should do differently.

- **How will we know it worked?** Tie the analytics to the outcome it was meant to move, and check.

The analyst’s job is the decision, not the dashboard

The best analytics people are not the ones who build the prettiest charts; they are the ones who sit close enough to the decision to know what would change it. That means asking the uncomfortable question early — “what will you do differently depending on what this shows?” — and being willing to hear “nothing,” which is the signal to stop building rather than the cue to add another view. An analyst measured on decisions influenced will push back on a request for a dashboard that changes nothing. An analyst measured on tickets closed will build it and move on. Put the analyst next to the decision, and the work changes on its own.

Where the value leaks

Value flows from data through insight to a decision, an action, and finally an outcome. Most analytics programs invest heavily in the first two steps and stop — the chain breaks at exactly the point where value would have been created (Figure 1).

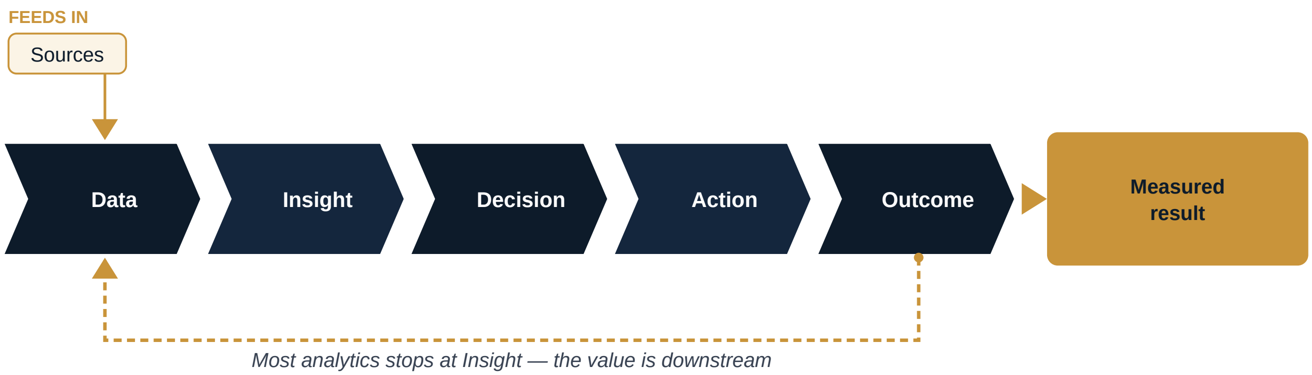

Figure 1. The analytics value chain. Data and insight are necessary but not sufficient; the value is created at decision, action, and outcome — the steps most programs never reach. Build for the right end of the chain.

Vanity versus decision-focused analytics

The tell is not how the dashboard looks. It is whether four things are true (Figure 2). A vanity dashboard fails all four and still gets built, because building it is easier than answering the questions it should have started with.

	Vanity dashboard	Decision-focused analytics
Tied to a specific decision	No	Yes
Has a named owner	No	Yes
Triggers a defined action	No	Yes
Measured on the outcome	No	Yes

Figure 2. Four questions separate analytics that changes behavior from analytics that decorates a wall. If the answer to any of them is “no,” you are building a report, not a decision tool.

Measure the decision, not the dashboard

An analytics team that measures itself on dashboards shipped will ship dashboards. One that measures itself on decisions improved will build very different things — fewer, sharper, owned, and tied to outcomes. The scoreboard drives the behavior. Change what you count, and you change what gets built.

The point of a number is a better choice

Analytics is not in the business of producing charts. It is in the business of producing better decisions, and a chart that changes no decision has produced nothing. Start from the choice, name the owner, define the action, measure the outcome — and be willing to delete the beautiful dashboard that fails those tests. The organizations that win with data are not the ones with the most dashboards. They are the ones whose people decide better because of them.

References

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