

Book Review
The Data Hero Playbook: Developing Your Data Leadership
Superpowers
Mindset as the Missing Variable: A Measured Look at The Data Hero
Playbook

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Abstract

Malcolm Hawker's *The Data Hero Playbook* (2025) argues that Chief Data Officers underperform not because of missing tools or frameworks, but because of mindset. Drawing on his years as a Gartner analyst and over sixty CDO Matters podcast interviews, Hawker adapts Carol Dweck's (2006) growth versus fixed mindset framework into a “positive” versus “limiting” spectrum, building an operational playbook around customer centricity, product management, value engineering, and an agile “Data Strategy MVP.” This review finds the book useful, although some claims are less persuasive than others, particularly where Hawker critiques the professional ecosystem in which he previously operated. But the book leans on individual agency, and its evidence relies heavily on qualitative accounts drawn from Hawker's professional network, which may limit the generalizability of its conclusions, particularly regarding structural issues such as short

CDO tenures, resourcing gaps, and analyst-consultant-vendor incentives that may lie beyond an individual leader's ability to address.

Keywords: data leadership; Chief Data Officer; growth mindset; data governance; digital transformation; product management

Hawker writes as a Gartner data and analytics veteran, now chief data officer at Profisee. His argument is that an epidemic of “limiting mindsets,” including all-or-nothing thinking, unaccountability, blame, risk aversion, and status-quo bias, shapes how data leaders see their customers, their role, and their own data. This raises an important distinction between mindset and agency: a leader's ability to act on a constructive mindset may remain constrained by the organizational conditions surrounding the role. Hawker gives considerable attention to the former but comparatively less attention to the latter.

The book's ten chapters move from diagnosis to prescription. The first half opens with statistics on the scale of underperformance: Hawker (2025), drawing on a 2023 Gartner survey, reports that roughly 44% of data and analytics leaders report that their teams are effective in providing value, and, citing IBM Institute for Business Value's (2023) Chief Data Officer Study of 3,000 CDOs, notes that only 8% qualify as “Data Value Creators.” The book then traces this to five limiting behaviors, above all his line that “data people have no data on the value of data” (Hawker, 2025). Chapter five widens the lens: analysts, consultants, vendors, and even large language models recycle the same explanations for CDO failure, a loop Hawker admits he once helped run, implicating his own past role in the pattern he critiques. The second half centers the internal “customer” and imports product management roles into data teams.

Hawker's strongest move borrows a finding from Kotter and Heskett (1992): organizational culture usually follows business success rather than preceding it, inverting the excuse he hears most, that real data work is impossible until a “data culture” exists first. These cases are presented by Hawker and are not independently verified in this review; they therefore function primarily as illustrations of his argument rather than independent evidence. Nike's pivot to direct-to-consumer against Kodak's refusal to touch its own digital-camera invention shows the pattern. Nike changed first and its culture followed, while Kodak's hardened around a product line it wouldn't cannibalize. The inclusion of Microsoft reinforces the pattern, although the cumulative use of these cases becomes somewhat repetitive.

The argument grows shakier when it turns on itself. Chapter five catalogues real structural pressures on CDOs, including tenures roughly half those of CIOs, and incentives running through analysts, consultants, and vendors (Hawker, 2025), yet the prescriptive chapters that follow put responsibility back on individual mindset. If eighteen- to twenty-four-month tenures make multiyear programs unrealistic, urging resilience addresses only part of the problem. A more structural response might include multiyear board mandates, governance separating data accountability from IT, and realistic rather than annual performance timelines; the book gives these little attention. Such an approach would also require stronger executive sponsorship, clearer resource commitments, and performance expectations aligned with the CDO's relatively short organizational horizon. These mechanisms shift part of the burden of change from individual mindset to the organizational conditions that enable or constrain effective data leadership. The organizational model presented in Chapter 7, which incorporates value-engineering and go-to-market functions,

also appears better suited to large, well-resourced enterprises than to organizations operating with more limited institutional capacity.

The book's timing helps its case. Its account of post-ChatGPT “readiness paralysis,” enterprises convincing themselves they need pristine data before touching generative AI while cheaper paths sit unused, is a useful corrective. This interpretation is ours rather than Hawker's; however, it is broadly consistent with a 2025 EY survey reporting that AI adoption is outpacing organizations' governance capacity (EY, 2025). The closing chapter's treatment of data sustainability, the EU's Digital Product Passport, and AI's energy footprint adds a necessary lens.

The evidentiary basis of a field guide is nevertheless important to evaluating the scope of its conclusions. Hawker builds his case from CDO Matters podcast guests and former Gartner client insights, a sampling basis that may limit how widely findings generalize. Qualitative evidence fits the topic, but the book sometimes makes sweeping claims or cites statistics without sourcing (Hawker, 2025).

The review initially approached data leadership primarily as a technical and governance problem; Hawker's emphasis on mindset broadens this perspective while also demonstrating why individual agency is insufficient on its own. In the reviewers' assessment, his organizing model will be easiest to implement in large, well-resourced enterprises; this gap may be particularly relevant in smaller organizations, the public sector, and resource-constrained contexts, where dedicated product-manager and value-engineer roles may be difficult to implement, though the framing could transfer there in scaled-down form. In such settings, the underlying principles

could instead be adapted through cross-functional responsibilities, simplified value measures, and governance practices that do not require dedicated product-management or value-engineering roles.

The book's primary value lies in its practical framework and emphasis on mindset rather than in the strength of its empirical evidence. The tension between recognizing structural constraints and prescribing individual solutions never fully resolves. The tension is best read as a limitation of the book's scope: the mindset framework is most useful when treated as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, organizational and governance reform. For practitioners, its greatest value therefore lies in combining its mindset and value-oriented tools with organizational reforms that address the structural conditions under which data leaders operate.

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