

# AI Lite

Some appreciative inquiry methodology is not designed for lower- and midlevel managers, who lack the authority to make companywide changes. Here are a few ways to adapt the same rules on a smaller scale.

By Kate Mantegna



Bob, a district sales manager for Acme Corporation, once dreamed of rising to the top and mentoring eager young business suit-clad men and women. But his dreams shatter daily under the stress of fixing one issue at a time. For every great quality he saw in each of his people in the interview room, he seems to find one equally impressive flaw. They're late on deadlines, short on creativity, and unprofessional. As he digs into the problems of his group, they loom larger.

Bob needs appreciative inquiry (AI). Although mostly applied to create large-scale, companywide changes, AI can be scaled down and used by nearly any leader. The principles of AI compel users to search for and appreciate the best of what already exists within their group or organization. Instructional designers and trainers can adapt these AI principles for midlevel managers in courses such as business analysis, improving productivity, or teamwork.

Wouldn't it be great if Bob could find success by strategically positioning the positive qualities of his group rather than focusing and diagnosing what's wrong? Bob uses traditional problem-solving to find what's broken and fix it. But what if he could organize the strengths of his group to discover new and innovative ways to eliminate

recurring issues and exceed his goals? Bob could use AI to go beyond merely fixing the problems in his group to tap into his people's greater potential.



## Why it's needed

There are a couple of reasons why AI needs to be adapted for midlevel managers. First, AI's language (design, destiny, and provocative proposition) appeals to "big picture" people. While its wording may cause a CEO's vision to expand, it might cause an operations-minded midlevel manager's head to explode.

Another reason for change is that AI practitioners often emphasize AI's long-term benefits. While typical midlevel managers may desire long-term solutions, they're often caught up in the immediacy of today's problems. It may

be a hard sell to have them switch from a quick-fix to a long-term solution, even if it promises more lasting results.



## Guidelines

Knowing the principles that make AI effective can help you make the right changes.

**1. Know your audience.** Be honest about the cultural prejudices that exist in your target audience and how these might affect their receptiveness. For example, AI language suits a visionary leader, but midlevel managers who hear this same language may assume it's akin to holding hands and singing Kumbaya.

Also consider the priorities of your midlevel managers. To have an influence, you'll need to convince them that AI will help with what's most important to them. To do this, you can pair AI principles and the 4-D process with savvy business tools used by traditional problem solving. For example, AI users can complete a cost-benefit analysis to analyze and prioritize different solutions.

**2. Customize your solution.** You can customize AI for your audience with a few strategic changes. As stated earlier, language can be a hindrance, but you don't need to use the four D words in the 4-D process. For example, if dream and destiny seem like drivel to your

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audience, use phrases that might be more palatable, such “imagine” and “perform.”

Effective instructional designers and trainers emphasize AI's short-term benefits to this audience. While AI initiatives often highlight long-term benefits, emphasizing short-term benefits answers the question of what AI can do for these managers right now.

Even when customizing AI, you'll still want to include principles that make it effective. These principles build the foundation on which AI exists. Here are a few.

- Our words become our reality.
- Change begins the moment we ask the first question.
- We become what we study.
- Future vision affects present-day action.

Your learners can probably offer evidence of these principles from their own experiences, and there's a definite payoff to showing the truth of these principles. After all, when you're asking business-savvy people to make real changes to the way they do business, it helps to show why it works.

**3. Require students to transfer AI theory into practice.** Effective instructional designers and trainers require learners to complete activities based on what they learned. Students who merely attend and participate in class may think it will work, but students who are required to complete an assignment will know it works.



## Results

You'll know it works when you see the transformation of your learners. I modified AI principles to teach midlevel managers to examine their business

reports and to then conduct a search for the best performers in a category of their choosing. At the follow-up class, they excitedly shared their stories and numbers. For example, one manager shared reports that demonstrated the short-term financial impact of his project and showed what these changes would mean for the rest of his organization. He accomplished all this by leveraging the best of what already existed in his organization. Despite their initial hesitation, my operations-savvy learners were astonished by how easy it was to practice and how much return they received.

So AI gets results, but even more importantly, it does so in a positive way, while building relationships with people and by rewarding top performers. This is just what Bob needs.

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## Checklist:

**In terms of considerations to make in advance, there are a number of points to consider before turning your next learning solution into an AI solution.**

- ☒ Are your learners open to learning new methods?
- ☒ Do they have time to complete training and a follow-up assignment?
- ☒ Do you know enough about AI to incorporate it?
- ☒ Do you and your learners have the backing of your leadership to follow through on AI processes and principles?
- ☒ Do you have a course topic that fits well?

## Resources:

- Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Whitney, D., Trosten-Bloom, A., Rader, K. (2010). *Appreciative Leadership*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Appreciative Inquiry Commons. [www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu](http://www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu)
- Corporation for Positive Change. [www.positivechange.org](http://www.positivechange.org)

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