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# Finding Your Appreciative Voice in Resistant Cultures

Finding our appreciative voice in resistant work cultures led by resistant leaders can be daunting. Leaders who achieve results using skills they are comfortable with and have worked in the past aren't always open to new ways to lead. As AI practitioners we can share our knowledge by using an appreciative voice that resonates and is heard. In this article, Lisa Rees explores the challenges of embedding AI in resistant cultures by reflecting on the past and finding new approaches in sharing the appreciative voice with others.

As a federal government leader with over thirty years of experience, I firmly believe a leader's role is to create positive work environments.<sup>1</sup> While I was able to do this for my teams, not all leaders see its importance or value. Many leaders pride themselves on achieving results through autocracy because their behaviors are revered, rewarded and promoted. It follows that aspiring leaders role-model similar behaviors, doing so to the detriment of forming relationships, building trust and leading change. How then can we begin to transform government – any organization really – to create positive work cultures? And how do we find our appreciative voice when our colleagues, employees and leaders are focused on fixing problems by themselves, without considering the voices of others?

Being introduced to Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and then becoming an AI practitioner, gave me the skills needed to share the AI philosophy, methodology and framework with others. However, my approach when introducing AI was not always heard or, quite honestly, appreciated. What I didn't understand at the time is, in order to embed AI in resistant cultures, you need to temper your appreciative voice in ways that resonate with resistant leaders.

## Today's leaders need new tools and skills

Most leaders have already attended numerous leadership courses or read a vast array of leadership books to equip them to lead change in fast moving, complex

<sup>1</sup> The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the agency or the federal government of the United States.

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work environments. They try new approaches, become frustrated when they don't produce the results they had hoped for, and go back to familiar ways of leading. Slowly, what worked before becomes ineffective, their teams begin to disengage and the goals they were hired to obtain aren't reached. As AI practitioners, we see a new way to lead and want to share the transformative power of AI with our leaders.

### Valuable lessons learned

As a new and enthusiastic AI practitioner I saw many opportunities to embed AI at work, but I was alone in my enthusiasm and vision on how AI could transform the future of our organization. I realized after several months and attempts, my inability to share AI at the level I had hoped had nothing to do with my leaders and organizational culture, and everything to do with me. I let my appreciative voice overwhelm others and people turned away from the very thing I was trying to share; I was overselling its power, rather than demonstrating it in personal practice. If I was ever going to share AI with others I had to reflect on my past behaviors, learn from my missteps and use a different approach to begin again. Below is what I learned and the steps I took to find my appreciative voice:

- Not everyone will embrace AI – don't take it personally. The more you try to force people to embrace AI, the more they will resist. Be patient and don't judge them unfavorably.
- Don't let your passion derail you – it's not about you. Temper your emotions by sharing your knowledge in a way that matches or mirrors the leader's disposition. Too much emotion will turn many leaders off and away.
- Be humble – not everyone thinks AI is great. Your leader has reached their position for a reason. If you show arrogance and superiority, you'll be shut down immediately. No one likes a know-it-all.
- Don't oversell it – AI doesn't always fit. There are times when an appreciative approach is not the right approach; make sure you know AI may be right for the situation before suggesting it.
- Ensure the people you introduce to AI are ready to listen – it's easier for people to learn about AI when they trust you and believe in your ability to lead change. Work to build trust with your leaders before introducing AI. When possible, demonstrating success that can be tied to your AI management style helps others be open to AI's value.



*Find a leader who has influence and is open to AI*



- Verify that your work culture is ready to accept AI – AI requires a high level of trust and collaboration amongst its leaders. AI is easier to implement across an organization when the culture already embodies AI practices or is curious about alternative approaches to change. When not sure, start small and seek out a smaller office (and a leader) that is ready. Showing even a small success helps others see its value and increases their willingness to explore AI.
- Find a leader who has influence and is open to AI – great leaders embrace new tools to lead change. Find one be your advocate, voice and champion of AI. They may not fully understand AI, but if they believe in the results, they will be your voice.
- Start slowly – if you sense resistance to AI, don't start with a big project like an AI summit. Consider something smaller like helping others learn how to ask appreciative questions and reframe challenges into positive topics.
- Use existing cultural language – if you work in a bureaucratic organization with transactional leaders, avoid uncomfortable words such as co-create, thrive, generative, positive and flourish. Use words like results, outcomes, goals and teamwork. Mirror language that will keep leaders open to “results and outcomes”, and therefore AI.
- Meet leaders where they are – if yours isn't ready to embrace AI, look for opportunities where you can embed AI principles in their existing work. Once they see the impact AI produces, they will be more receptive.
- Be a role model – every day you have the opportunity to run appreciative meetings, ask appreciative questions, write appreciative emails and have appreciative conversations. People will notice the AI approach is “different” in a positive way, especially when they get better results.
- Introduce AI in strategic planning – not many people love strategic planning so offer a new approach. Instead of focusing on a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), introduce them to the AI framework of SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results) and see what happens. Chances are you'll notice more engagement, enthusiasm and positive outcomes as a result.



- Look for opportunities to share AI – be a teacher. You worked hard to become an AI practitioner so share it with the world. Help people learn by conducting AI workshops, sharing AI concepts with your staff and colleagues, facilitating AI meetings, helping people ask great questions, inviting others to collaborate and envision a shared future.
- Don't give up – you will hit roadblocks and have setbacks; be resilient. Use AI principles to propel you forward. Your organization (and the world) needs more people like you!

### It can be done

These action steps will help you find your appreciative voice in the most resistant work cultures with the most resistant leaders. Leaders are eager to learn new approaches that benefit them, their employees and the organizations they serve. Leaders want to make a positive difference. As AI practitioners, we have an opportunity to help them achieve new levels of success in ways they never imagined. But we can only do so when we use our appreciative voice in ways that are heard – and appreciated.

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