



# Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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Created by John Stepper

## Week 8: Practice empathy & engagement

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### What to expect this week

How you offer something can sometimes make all the difference. This week, you'll practice empathy as you offer contributions so you can refine the way you write your messages and approach people in general. It's an important skill to develop. Just as the same gift can feel different whether it's beautifully wrapped or not wrapped at all, you can make your contributions feel more personal and valuable with a little practice.

### Related reading from *Working Out Loud*

*Chapter 15 - How to Approach People*

*Chapter 19 - Shipping and Getting Better*

Blog post: [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-empathy-test](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-empathy-test)

*"How This Guy Can Get People to Read His E-mails"* by Ramit Sethi

*"PSA: Email Introduction Etiquette"* by Anand Sanwal

*"3 LinkedIn Email Responses For Invitations to Connect"* by Helen Blunden

### Suggested agenda

This is a practical session that you can apply to your own communications right away. As you do the exercises, try to use real examples from your own work and life.

Thing to do	Approx. time
Check-in	10 mins
Exercise: Read and discuss the three related articles above	20
Exercise: Selling free (or "Earning attention")	15
Discuss the importance of empathy in your communications	10

Thing to do	Approx. time
Checkout for Week 8	5

**Check-in (10 minutes)**

Talk for a few minutes each about whether you feel you’re making progress. It may be new relationships, new opportunities, or just new ways of thinking about your goals. Focus on listening to each other.

**Exercise: Read and discuss the three related articles above (20 minutes)**

If you haven’t read the suggested articles by Ramit Sethi, Anand Sanwal, and Helen Blunden, read them now. (If you have read them, skim them again and prepare to discuss them.) These very different articles have something important in common: they require you to adopt the other person’s point of view as you offer your gift. In general, being mindful of the following three questions changes how you feel when you approach someone:

- What would my reaction be if I were that person?*
- Why should she care?*
- Why am I doing this?*

These questions invoke empathy and generosity, and make you more mindful of the actions you take and the words you use. When you frame your contribution as a genuine gift, it’s liberates you from the fear of being pushy or being rejected. Examining your motives helps you avoid being manipulative, insincere, or otherwise doing something you’re uncomfortable with. Seth Godin described it as the “sound of confidence”: “Generosity, not arrogance. Problem-solving, not desperation. Helpfulness, not selfishness.”

After everyone has read the articles, discuss whether the approach described in each is something you agree is better for both the giver and receiver.

**Exercise: Selling free (or “Earning attention”) (15 minutes)**

Now comes the art of delivering these messages so they will be read and appreciated. Ramit Sethi, author and entrepreneur, captured it well in his article: “You have to sell free.” The word “sell” has negative connotations, but what it really means is showing people why they should care. Here’s an excerpt from his article:

*For example, do not just send people a book recommendation or random URL. In a world full of thousands of links a day, you might as well send that e-mail straight to the trash.*

*Sending people a random link—even if it would change their lives— isn’t a favor. It’s a burden. You have to “sell” free. You have to explain why this link matters and what they’ll get out of it.*

The key is empathy. *What will the other person be thinking as she reads this?* As you keep that in mind, you’ll want your own messages to have three elements: appreciation, personalization, and value. Whatever channel you use to reach someone, you must show sincere, thoughtful appreciation for the recipient. How you deliver that gift depends on your level of intimacy with the person as well as the relevance of the gift. The less intimate the relationship, the less invasive the channel you should use. Mentions on Twitter or your corporate intranet, for example, are neither an introduction or burden, whereas a text message can be seen as both, with email in between the two.

Try to make at least one contribution now - e.g., share an article or make an introduction - and practice empathy as you do it. Even when asking for help, your first thoughts should still be about empathy and generosity. *How will the recipient receive your request and is there any way to frame it as a contribution?*

Before you ask to “pick someone’s brain” or offer an exchange of coffee for an hour of their day (less than minimum wage!), take the time to figure out how the other person can gain something too. It might take some creative thinking on your part, but it will help you stand out and get better results.

### **Discuss the importance of empathy in communications (10 minutes)**

Discuss examples of empathy - and the lack of it - in your everyday communications. Talk about your own “Sell free” exercise, and think of the email and other messages you get. Do people typically practice empathy? Share some of the best and worst examples you’ve come across.

### **Checkout for Week 8 (5 minutes)**

1. Schedule the next meeting.
2. Remind people to read the Week 9 circle guide and suggested reading.
3. Ask: “What will you do this week?”

You’re two-thirds of the way through the process now. Keep going through your relationship list and making contributions. Consider each contribution an opportunity to practice empathy, and try to offer at least one this week.

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Q: Selling free seems fake.*

If it feels fake or inauthentic, stop. Only share something you think is a genuine contribution that might be helpful or interesting to the other person. If you feel like it's a trick, manipulation, or stealthy request for a favor, don't send it. If you don't like the phrase "selling free," think of it as "earning someone's attention."

*Q: But what if my contributions aren't good enough?*

Although your early original contributions may not meet your aspirations, whether they are "good enough" depends more on how they're offered and the expectations around them. If I pay two thousand dollars for a vase from a store, I expect a certain level of craftsmanship. If my friend is learning to make pottery and offers me one of his first creations as a gift, I'll cherish it no matter how misshapen it may be.

## Bonus exercises

### **Easy: Something you can do in less than a minute**

Think of a message you received recently that made you feel more connected to the person who sent it. What was it about the message that made you feel that way? Try to identify how you could use some of those same elements to make others feel more connected to you and make your messages more personal and engaging.

### **More challenging: Something you can do in less than 5 minutes**

Imagine you receive a LinkedIn connection request from someone, and it's the default, impersonal message provided by LinkedIn: *I'd like to connect with you on LinkedIn.* How would you feel? If you're like me, you might think, "Gee, he couldn't even spend thirty seconds to send a personal message!" Requesting a LinkedIn connection provides an opportunity to practice empathy. You should *always* personalize your request.

Now pick someone in your network that you've interacted with already and send him or her a personal request. If you're still unsure, you can send me a request and put in a personal greeting, mention you're reading the book, or tell me which part you found helpful. That's "earning someone's attention."

LinkedIn makes it difficult to send a personalized request, particularly from your phone. Great! Your personalized note will stand out even more amid all the generic, computer-generated requests that people receive. It's worth the time to do it well.