

Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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Getting started

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Chances are, you're reading this because you're looking for something. Maybe you want to get better at what you do or seek different career opportunities. Maybe you'd like to explore a new interest. Maybe you want your organization to become a more collaborative, engaging workplace. Working Out Loud can help you achieve your goals.

What is Working Out Loud?

Here's a short definition from workingoutloud.com:

"Working Out Loud is an approach to building relationships that can help you in some way. It's a practice that combines conventional wisdom about relationships with modern ways to reach and engage people.

Instead of networking to get something, you lead with generosity, investing in relationships that give you access to other people, knowledge, and possibilities. Part of the process is learning ways to make your work visible and frame it as a contribution. Combined, these elements form a powerful approach to work and life.

When you Work Out Loud, you feel good and empowered at the same time because the practice taps into your intrinsic needs for autonomy, mastery, and purpose. As people across an organization Work Out Loud, work becomes more effective and fulfilling, and the culture becomes more open and collaborative."

What's a Working Out Loud Circle?

A Working Out Loud (WOL) Circle help you put these ideas into practice. It's a peer support process in which you build relationships related to a goal you care about. Over the course of twelve 60-minute sessions, you and the others in your Circle will do practical exercises that help you make connections, unlock access to expertise and ideas, and create more opportunities. By the end of your time together, each of you will have developed a larger,

more diverse network that's related to your goal - a set of relationships that matter. You'll have also developed habits and a mindset you can apply towards any goal.

WOL is for work, too. WOL Circles can be readily integrated into on-boarding, leadership, and digital transformation programs. The Circle Guides help people use digital tools to make connections, share work, and deepen relationships. As WOL Circles spread across an organization, the culture changes, becoming more agile and collaborative. Dion Hinchcliffe, author and Chief Strategy Officer, called Working Out Loud "perhaps the most fundamental digital workplace skill."

WOL Circles are now in over 20 countries and a wide range of organizations. (Examples and other resources are at the end of this section of the guide.)

How WOL Circles work

You can think of your WOL Circle as a kind of "guided mastery" program for collaboration and relationship-building. You learn by doing. Each week, with the help of the Circle Guides and the other members of your Circle, you practice different ways to find people related to your work and develop meaningful relationships.

The most common words that Circle members use to describe how they feel after 12 weeks are "confident" and "empowered." That's because with each step you take, you're tapping into your intrinsic motivation - your innate needs for a bit more control, competence, and connection.

Here are six important things to know about your Circle.

You start with an individual goal you care about. Each of you in the Circle will pick your own goal. You want to each pick something you care about and can make progress towards in 12 weeks. It's one of the first exercises in Week 1, and the Circle Guide for that week will give you some helpful instructions.

Circles are confidential. Members of a Circle will learn better when they're in a supportive environment and don't need to fear being judged or gossiped about. It's important that members can be open about their goals, their learning, and their struggles without fear of judgment or rejection. Trust is the most important element of a successful Circle.

Circles are best with four to five people. More than five people means there's too much communications overhead and not enough time to provide detailed feedback on each individual's progress. Generally, more diverse Circles lead to more creativity and ideas. Many Circles meet via video, allowing them to include people in different locations.

Circles meet for one hour a week for 12 weeks. Think of the hour you meet each week as investing 2% of your time to develop a 21st-century skill. Making that investment for 12 weeks is long enough for you to develop new habits, and short enough so your effort is focused and sustainable.

There's a simple, structured curriculum. The 12 weeks are meant to be a guided mastery program. That means you take small steps, get feedback, and make progress at your own pace. There are specific exercises, but there is no test and no judgment. Some Circles choose to do the exercises in between meetings and leave more time for discussion while others do as much as they can in their one hour together. Any progress you make will help you build your network and increase your chances of reaching your goal.

One member is the Circle Coordinator or Facilitator. Groups work best when one individual takes it upon themselves to keep things organized, positive, and productive. They're taking care of things like organizing meetings and keeping track of time. It's not meant to be a big job, and the Coordinator is a peer like everyone else - not managing the group as much as serving them. Some groups choose to rotate this responsibility.

You can learn more about Working Out Loud and WOL Circles by watching the TEDx talk ["Working Out Loud: The Making of a movement"](#) or by reviewing any of the other resources listed at the end of this Getting Started section.

Tips for a successful Circle

As Circles form across many countries and organizations, I get a chance to see what's working well and what's challenging. The results described in the reviews of *Working Out Loud* range from feeling more open and optimistic to accomplishing specific goals.

"After just one WOL Circle meeting, I was already feeling more connected with my colleagues and more encouraged about my career."

"I am really enjoying the process outlined in this book...It is clear and concise and motivating. John Stepper provides small easy steps to guide us...I honestly feel empowered to own my success and not wait for it to come knocking."

These tips - in order of importance - will help your Circle have a similar experience.

1. *Maintain momentum.* Try to plan all your meetings ahead of time, anticipating holidays and other breaks. If one can't attend and you can't easily reschedule, have the meeting anyway and use other channels to help the person keep up.
2. *If you get stuck, take smaller steps.* As with almost any new habit or skill, there may come a time when your motivation lags and you want to give up. It's natural. When that happens, *shrink the change.* Better to do one small thing than to skip the week entirely.
3. *Communicate between meetings.* Whether it's via text or email or some other channel the group decides on, share your progress or ask your Circle for help if you need it. Each time you do, you'll provide a gentle nudge that can help others take a step.

4. *Have a clear, achievable goal you care about.* Focus on a simple learning goal (“I’d like to explore that” or “I’d like to get better at that”), or pick a straightforward work goal (“I’d like more recognition”). Better to practice and make progress than pick a goal that’s too abstract or isn’t appealing enough.
5. *Schedule time to work out loud.* Building relationships is an investment in yourself. Remember to “pay yourself first.” Even a single 30-minute session each week or two 15-minute sessions will help you make meaningful progress.
6. *Read the Circle Guides before the meetings.* This will give you more time for the exercises and discussion in your Circle meetings. (Reading the book and subscribing to updates from workingoutloud.com will also help you make progress.)
7. *Help each other.* If you’re stuck, ask your Circle for help. Or if you see someone struggling to make progress, slow things down and see what assistance you can offer. These small acts of vulnerability and generosity are at the heart of Working Out Loud. (You can also join the [WOL Community on Facebook](#) and ask for advice from practitioners around the world. Or contact me at john.stepper@workingoutloud.com. Links to these and other resources are at the end of this section of the guide.)
8. *Relax and enjoy yourself.* The time you spend thinking about your goals and practicing ways to build meaningful relationships is time well spent. Enjoy it.

The rest of the Circle Guide

Below, you’ll find an FAQ, additional resources for learning more, an overview of what happens in each of the 12 weeks, and a beautiful infographic by Tanya Vora that captures the 5 Elements of Working Out Loud.

You’re ready to start with Week 1. I wish you well!

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Does the Circle have one goal or do we each have different goals?

You each have a different, individual goal. Each of you should pick something you care about and can make progress towards in 12 weeks. There are simple instructions to help you in Week 1 of the Circle Guide.

Q: Is there any help besides the guides?

There's a video coaching series under development. That will give you insights and tips each week that you can watch on your phone or in your meeting. For more information, send me email at john.stepper@workingoutloud.com.

Q: How does WOL apply to an organization?

Almost every organization is looking for ways to be more agile or innovative, or to increase employee engagement. Yet, the change management programs and digital transformation programs typically miss the most important piece: changing day-to-day behavior. Working Out Loud Circles help people develop new habits and a new mindset at work. As more people across an organization Work Out Loud, work becomes more effective and fulfilling, and the culture becomes more open and collaborative.

As Circles start to spread, I will often work with organizations to customize the Circle Guides and conduct training using that material. By referring to the goals, examples, and technology of the organization, the WOL Circle process becomes even more effective. For more information, send me email at john.stepper@workingoutloud.com. (Some options and examples are at the end of this section of the guide.)

Q: Why is it 12 weeks long?

The only way to develop new habits is through repetition over time. Studies show that your brain physically changes in three to eight weeks depending on the activity. Through repetition, the activity becomes more automatic and, combined with feedback, you become more proficient. The 12 weeks gives you more chances to practice connecting with people in different ways and to get feedback so you learn.

Q: What makes for a good Circle?

Some of the most interesting and effective Circles are when people have different backgrounds and goals, and when they're not competing in any way. That tends to bring different perspectives and insights to the exercises, enabling the group to learn more.

Q: Can our Circle meet via video?

Absolutely. In-person meetings, like a meeting in a cafe, for example, have a charm all their own and feel different than videoconferences. But participating in a virtual Circle makes it possible to include people in other cities and countries. That can increase the diversity of your Circle and make it more likely to be effective. Virtual Circles can also take less time, since they don't require extra time to go to and from the meeting. For more, see: workingoutloud.com/blog//faq-can-our-wol-circle-meet-virtually

Q. What if I'm not an extrovert or don't like social media?

What matters most is that you frame your goals in terms of other people and in terms of contributions you might make that could deepen the relationship. That requires empathy, reflection, and mindfulness more than extroversion or facility with tools. The blog posts in the related resources go into much more detail. There's more detail in these articles:

- workingoutloud.com/blog/working-out-loud-the-rise-of-the-introverts
- workingoutloud.com/blog/working-out-loud-when-you-dont-want-to-be-visible
- workingoutloud.com/blog/working-out-loud-over-email-or-coffee

Q: Do I need to read the book?

It's not required to read *Working Out Loud*, though doing so will improve your chances of making progress towards your goal and working out loud effectively.

Q. Where can I find answers to other questions?

There is a Frequently Asked Questions section in each week of the Circle Guide, and you can find more information in the book and on workingoutloud.com. You can also ask questions of other practitioners in the Working Out Loud communities on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). Links are at the end of this section of the guide.

Additional resources

More about Working Out Loud

- workingoutloud.com - Circle Guides, Blog, FAQ and more
- *Working Out Loud: For a Better Career and Life*, by John Stepper - Link: workingoutloud.com
- Video: “Working Out Loud: The making of a movement” (9 1/2 minutes) - Link: youtube.com/watch?v=XpjNI3Z10uc
- “The 5 elements of Working Out Loud (Revisited)” - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/the-5-elements-of-working-out-loud-revisited

Private global communities for practitioners (The Facebook community is much more active)

- facebook.com/groups/workingoutloud/
- linkedin.com/groups/4937010

Ways to contact me

- workingoutloud.com/blog
- facebook.com/workingoutloud
- twitter.com/workingoutloud
- twitter.com/johnstepper
- linkedin.com/in/johnstepper
- john.stepper@workingoutloud.com

On intrinsic motivation

- Video: “The puzzle of motivation” - Link: ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation

Making work better by spreading WOL Circles

- Support options: workingoutloud.com/for-your-organization
- On-boarding for new joiners - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/a-better-way-to-welcome-people-to-your-organization
- For a more innovative culture - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/if-your-innovation-program-isnt-producing-much-innovation
- Mentoring & digital literacy - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/a-better-approach-to-mentoring-at-work
- Employee engagement - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/when-the-employee-survey-results-arent-good
- Digital Leadership - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/the-manager-who-works-out-loud

What happens in a WOL Circle?

12 Weeks in One Page

Week 1: Choose a simple goal & list people related to it

In your first week, you'll get to know your other Circle members, and each of you will pick your own individual goal. Then you'll take your first step towards that goal by creating a "relationship list." You may feel uncertain in the beginning - about your goal or even about sharing things. But over the 12 weeks, as a sense of trust develops among people in the group, you'll feel more encouraged and empowered.

Week 2: Offer your first contributions

In Week 2, you'll make simple contributions to people on your relationship list, deepening relationships in some small way. Just looking at the list will attune your attention to your goal, and the simple steps you take will feel empowering.

Week 3: Take three small steps

In Week 3, you'll make a simple adjustment to managing your time, add to your relationship list, and offer another kind of contribution. Some of you may well refine your goal or even change it. That's fine. The key is to keep practicing by doing the exercises each week.

Week 4: Earn someone's attention

When you're offering something, how you offer it can make all the difference. This week, you'll practice empathy, refining the way you write your messages and approach people in general. Just as beautiful wrapping can make the same gift can feel different, a little thoughtfulness can make your contributions feel more personal and valuable.

Week 5: Make it personal

Most people think far too narrowly about what they have to offer. This week will change that, and help you understand how the broad set of things that make you *you* can serve as the basis for a connection with someone else.

Week 6: Improve your visibility

It's hard for anyone to discover you and your work when you're invisible. This week, to improve your chances of making connections, you'll take a step towards improving your online presence. Then you'll use that presence to make new connections.

Week 7: Be purposeful

This week, you'll do one of the most powerful exercises in your Circle: the "Letter from your future self." By articulating a longer-term vision of what might be possible for you, you'll increase the chances of that vision becoming a reality.

Week 8: Become more systematic

Having a system can make things easier. This week, you'll work with two simple systems, one for identifying new contributions and one for managing your relationship list. Then you'll practice empathy (again!) in a way that might surprise you - and will certainly distinguish you.

Week 9: Explore more original contributions

This week you'll further expand your range of contributions to include making more of your work and thinking visible. This may be new to some of you or make you uncomfortable, so the exercises allow you to create something simple that's also a generous contribution to others.

Week 10: Make it a habit

You've spent nine weeks thinking of your goal in terms of people and contributions. Yet you're still working on making it a habit and mindset. It's natural, for example, to struggle with finding the time or with remembering to follow up. This week, you'll explore things that will reinforce your new habit so it takes less effort and feels increasingly natural. It will also help you overcome the inevitable challenges and setbacks.

Week 11: Imagine the possibilities

So far, the focus has been on contributions and connections. In Week 11, you'll expand your sense of what's possible by thinking more broadly about your network and your role in it.

Week 12: Reflect and celebrate


This final week marks the end of a process, and maybe a kind of beginning. You'll reflect on what has changed for you and what might come. You'll make some additional contributions, including several for yourself.

Consider holding this final meeting over lunch or dinner if you can. (If you're meeting via video, you might each sip your favorite beverage.) It's a nice way to celebrate your time together, and provides a good environment for reflecting on your progress and discussing possible next steps.

FIVE ELEMENTS of WORKING OUT LOUD

John Stepper

Relationships

ARE AT THE  OF WOL



THE PATH TO
KNOWLEDGE IS
VIA OTHERS 

Generosity



WE ARE
WIRED FOR
RECIPROCAL
ALTRUISM

THE CURRENCY OF REAL
NETWORKING IS GENEROSITY

Visible Work



AMPLIFY
WHO YOU
ARE &
WHAT YOU DO



EXTENDS
YOUR
REACH

Purposeful Discovery



HAVING A LEARNING
GOAL IN MIND
ORIENTS YOUR ACTIVITIES

Growth Mindset



DEVELOP AN OPEN,
CURIOUS APPROACH TO
WORK & LIFE

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