



# Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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## Week 2: Offer your first contributions

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### What to expect this week

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.

### Suggested agenda

Thing to do	Approx. time
1. Check-in	10 mins
2. Exercise: Intimacy levels	5
3. Exercise: Make your first contributions	20
4. Discuss your contributions	20
5. Checkout for Week 2	5

#### 1. Check-in (10 minutes)

In an excellent article entitled, "How to Start a Meeting," the author describes a simple technique to "encourage everyone in the room to focus on the meeting and each other." She called it a "check-in." (There's a link at the end of this guide.)

It's just a quick way for each person to participate right at the start, and to let everyone know something relevant for this session. Your check-in can vary each week. The most common thing is to have each person answer the question, "What happened since the last meeting?" Other good check-in questions include "How are you feeling?" or "What's going on for you that people in the room might need to know?" There's no judgment or discussion, just an opportunity to contribute and be present.

## 2. Exercise: Intimacy levels (5 minutes)

It helps to be conscious that not all relationships in your network are the same. The most obvious way they differ is the depth of the connection. Offering to watch your friend's child, for example, is a nice gesture. But the same offer to a stranger can get you into trouble. Here is a simple intimacy scale from one to five:

1. The person doesn't know you exist.
2. You're connected in some way. (e.g., you follow them online)
3. You've had one or more interactions.
4. You've collaborated, even in a small way.
5. You regularly interact, exchange ideas, and help each other.

For this quick exercise, go through your relationship list and jot down your intimacy level for each person. As you do, keep in mind that the objective isn't to get to level five with everyone. You're simply trying to deepen some of your relationships with contributions over time.

## 3. Exercise: Making your first contributions (20 minutes)

Now you're ready to make your first contribution. In this exercise, you'll offer something that everyone has and that everyone wants: *attention*.

You'll start by searching the Internet (or the intranet at work) for people on your list, looking for some kind of online presence they may have. Look for online profiles like a Twitter account, a blog, an intranet profile, or some other online content they've created. No need to worry about what to say or write. For now, especially for people you don't know, you're just looking for an unobtrusive way to move the relationship from level one to level two.

For example, if you both have a Twitter account or intranet profile, follow them there. (Following someone on Twitter or your intranet is different from Facebook and LinkedIn in that it doesn't require the other person to do anything. That's one reason why Twitter and your intranet are often the simplest and most effective places to take a first step in forming a connection.) If you see a person publishes on LinkedIn, or the intranet, or has their own website, start reading. If you like what you find, let them know by hitting a Like button. If you want to keep receiving updates, look for a Follow button or the ability to subscribe by email.

For each person on your list, include where you found them, or write "Nothing yet" if you don't find an online presence.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Discussing contributions among the group (20 minutes)

Before you start your discussion, take a moment and read The Generosity Test at the end of this week’s guide. It will only take 2 to 3 minutes. Please do it now.

Once you’re finished, discuss how each of you did on the test, and talk about the simple contributions you made today. How did they *feel*? Were you able to offer attention without any strings attached? What about when you help each other?

*“The key to real generosity is to be detached from the outcomes. Go ahead and hold the door open without any expectation of a thank you. Make a helpful introduction. Offer some assistance without any mental strings attached.”*

*Your small gifts, freely given over the course of your network, will deepen relationships and unlock access to possibilities.”*

#### 5. Checkout for Week 2 (5 minutes)

1. Confirm the time and place for the next meeting.
2. Ask: “What will you do this week?”

That last question makes each person mindful of what’s coming up. A brief answer is enough, perhaps a minute or less. This coming week, for example, you might read content from some of the people on your list, making more contributions, or doing the additional exercises on the next page.

Write down what you will do this week, and you will be even more likely to do it. You’ll increase the chances even further if you write down when and where you will do it.

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## Frequently Asked Questions

*Q: Is it better to do the exercises during the meeting or in between meetings?*

The answer is **do whatever increases the chances of you actually doing the exercises**. Some Circles feel it's best to use the time together for discussion and to do the exercises outside of the meetings. That's great - unless one or more of you never get to it. So feel free to consider your Circle meetings to be working meetings. Doing the exercises quietly for a few minutes is totally appropriate.

*Q: What if I'm having trouble finding people?*

Don't limit yourself to people you know. Practice your sleuthing skills as you play Internet or Intranet Detective. For example, once you find one person, try to see who that person is connected to, and keep following the trail of connections. When you're stuck, ask for help from your Circle members! Circles are peer support groups, after all, and part of the process is learning to ask for and offer help.

*Q: What's a good system for keeping track of my relationships?*

I started with pen and paper. Then I switched to index cards. Now I use a spreadsheet. Other people are comfortable with Evernote or a simple application that they can access on their phone or tablet. There's no one best system, but only what's best for you at a given point in your practice. Make sure any technology you use is an enabler, and not a barrier or distraction. Simplicity and convenience are the most important attributes of any system you choose.

*Q: The first contribution seems so trivial. Does it really make a difference?*

While it is a small step, it can make a significant difference. The simple act of writing down a list of people related to your goal attunes your attention. You become increasingly aware of their work, their thinking, and feedback from others about them. Once you're paying attention, you notice people and ideas you hadn't seen before. You make connections you hadn't thought of and you start to think differently about your goal. (This idea is explored further in "Why is Italo Calvino stalking me?" A link is at the end of this guide.)

*"Deciding what we pay attention to can shape our entire world view. It can decide which doors are open to us and which doors we never see."*

## If you want to do more...

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

Each day we pass people by without recognizing them. Perhaps it's the person cleaning the restroom, doing the landscaping, or providing some other service we tend to take for granted. Today, as you see someone you would normally pass by, offer them attention by greeting them or thanking them for their work. As you do this, pay special attention to how you feel. Notice the expression on the other person's face, and imagine how they might be feeling.

Working Out Loud is a practice. Beginning with small steps like offering attention and recognition, you gradually build a capability and a mindset of deepening relationships through generosity. Even mundane interactions are opportunities to practice offering these gifts. (There's a link below to an article about this practice titled, "The Corporate Bathroom Test.")

### **More challenging: Something you can do in less than 10 minutes**

Create an account on LinkedIn. (If you're in Germany, you might choose Xing, a similar platform that's popular there.) For now, just add a photo and one place you've worked. You can add more later. If you already have an account, take a minute to install the app on your phone and review your profile. If you're part of an organization that uses an enterprise social network (like Jive or Yammer or Connections), then use the same photo to update that profile too.

## To read, listen to, or watch

### *The Check-in*

- "How to start a meeting" by Kristin Cobble - Link: <http://time.com/56823/how-to-start-a-meeting/>

### *Attuning your attention*

- "How this one simple act gives you access to new possibilities" - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/how-this-one-simple-act-gives-you-access-to-new-possibilities](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/how-this-one-simple-act-gives-you-access-to-new-possibilities)
- "Why is Italo Calvino stalking me?" - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/why-is-italo-calvino-stalking-me?rq=italo](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/why-is-italo-calvino-stalking-me?rq=italo)

### *More about contributions*

- "The Generosity Test" - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-generosity-test](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-generosity-test)
- "The Corporate Bathroom Test" - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-corporate-bathroom-test](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-corporate-bathroom-test)

# The Generosity Test

It's such a simple test, and yet it's one that I need to keep taking. The more I practice, the more it applies to things I do throughout the day, and throughout my life. If you're like me, you might be disturbed by the results.

You can take the Generosity Test by imagining it in your head or, even better, actually doing it later today:

***The Generosity Test: Hold the door open for someone you don't know.***

As you do this, pay close attention before, during, and after. Notice what you're thinking the moment you decide to do it, the way you do it, and how you feel after you've done it.



## **“After you!”**

Here's what happens when I do this exercise:

1. I get a good feeling when I decide to open the door. *I'm about to do something nice.*
2. I make eye contact with the other person or say something to make sure they see me opening the door. *After you!*
3. When they thank me, I get another surge of good feeling. If they don't, however, I get irritated, even angry. *How rude!*

It took me a while before I recognized that I wasn't really opening the door for the other person. I was opening it for myself and for those positive emotions I would experience. The person didn't consent to participate in my little feel-good exercise. For all I know, they could be deep in thought or otherwise not in a frame of mind to appreciate or even notice my gesture.

### **Reciprocity - for better & for worse**

In Robert Cialdini's oft-cited book, *Influence*, he writes about how people are wired to reciprocate and how you can use that to influence people to do things. Charities, for example, often include a small token like address labels in their mailed requests for a donation. That triggers a sense of obligation and makes it more likely you'll do something in return.

It works. Even social media-savvy people like Guy Kawasaki reference Cialdini's work and advise you to "invoke reciprocity":

*"When you help someone with something, and they say thank you, say "I know you would do the same for me." Most people would then be obligated to return the favor at this point."*

But how does that *feel*? Does it produce sustainable results or does it only work once? After your first batch of free address labels or the overt mention of returning the favor, you get the idea that you're being manipulated or that the other person is keeping score.

### **A better approach to giving**

Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn, offers different advice. In his book, *The Start-Up of You*, he had "a theory of small gifts" and the role they play in building relationships.

*"It seems counterintuitive, but the more altruistic your attitude, the more benefits you will gain from the relationship. If you insist on a quid pro quo every time you help others, you will have a much narrower network and a more limited set of opportunities. Conversely, if you set out to help others...simply because you think it's the right thing to do, you will rapidly reinforce your own reputation and expand your universe of possibilities."*

Small gifts, freely given, are like magic for both parties. For the giver, the contributions feel authentic and genuine because there are no strings attached. It's easier to give because you're not manipulating or promoting, you're being helpful. The receiver, sensing this, isn't burdened by the weight of an obligation, and the gift no longer feels like an unwanted transaction.

Importantly, when you offer things freely, there is still a benefit. But it isn't on an individual basis - "I did this for you and you'll pay me back." ***It's over the course of your network.*** Across the set of relationships in your network, the tendency to reciprocate will yield an aggregate benefit for the person who gives and eliminates the need to keep score.

## **The Zen of Holding The Door Open**

So how did you do on the Generosity Test? What are your true motives in holding the door, and would you be annoyed if you didn't get the response you expected?

If your answers aren't as noble as you would like, that's okay. Offering small gifts freely takes practice. That's why there are so many contribution exercises in Working Out Loud Circles. The repeated practice helps you develop new habits and a new mindset regarding how you make contributions.

The key to real generosity is to be detached from the outcomes. Go ahead and hold the door open without any expectation of a thank you. Make a helpful introduction. Offer some assistance without any mental strings attached.

Your small gifts, freely given over the course of your network, will deepen relationships and unlock access to possibilities.

*Note: This post also appeared on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/pulse/generosity-test-john-stepper](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/generosity-test-john-stepper)*