



Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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Week 5: Make it personal

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What to expect this week

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.

Suggested agenda

Thing to do	Approx. time
1. Check-in	10 mins
2. Exercise: So much to offer	15
3. Discuss your facts about you	10
4. Exercise: Make a personal connection	20
5. Checkout for Week 5	5

1. Check-in (10 minutes)

In this week's check-in, focus on how you're feeling. As you listen to the others, try your best to put yourselves in their shoes. You don't need to "fix" anything at this point. Simply paying attention and actively listening can be helpful.

2. Exercise: So much to offer! (15 minutes)

At the beginning of chapter 14 of *Working Out Loud*, there's a quote from the author Murakami: "The fact that I'm me and no one else is one of my greatest assets." But most people think far too narrowly about what they have to offer. This exercise will help you think

more broadly. For example, here are ten facts about that could be the basis of yet more contributions:

1. Whether you have children, and facts about them.
2. Places you've lived.
3. Where you grew up.
4. Your gender.
5. Places you've worked.
6. Vacations you've taken.
7. Physical challenges you had to deal with.
8. Career mistakes you've made.
9. Schools you attended.
10. Things you love doing.

Each of these can form the basis of a shared experience with someone, especially if it's framed as a contribution. Listing them can help you make the shift from offering universal gifts to making contributions that are personal and specific to you. Their personal nature increases their value both to you and to potential recipients.

Now try to write 50 facts about you. When I first did this exercise, I struggled because I felt the things on my list had to be big accomplishments. Now I know that any part of my experience might be interesting to *someone* else if I frame it as a contribution. Here are a few from my list that have each been the basis of a connection with other people:

1. I live in New York City.
2. I have five children.
3. I became a vegetarian in my 40s.
4. My wife is Japanese.
5. My mother had diabetes.
6. I attended Regis High School & Columbia University.
7. I studied computer science
8. I practice yoga & meditation.
9. I self-published a book.
10. I recently learned to play piano.

For this exercise, don't worry about who the gift is for. Free yourself, and try to write down as many things as you can that make you *you*.

Of course, this kind of thing happens all the time. You offer travel tips to someone. You share what you learned when your child was sick. You refer someone to your favorite restaurant. Usually it seems like pure coincidence or luck when something like this happens. But if you're mindful that you have so much to offer, then the opportunities for you to make such a contribution will greatly increase.

Now, scan your list of facts, pick one, and identify a person on your relationship list for whom this might be a contribution. Write down that person's name now, and send them a message.

If you're stuck, send me an email at john.stepper@workingoutloud.com and tell me the favorite place you've traveled. I would enjoy learning about new places, and I'll respond with my own favorite destination.

5. Checkout for Week 5 (5 minutes)

1. Schedule the next meeting.
2. Ask: "What will you do this week?"

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.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: I only got to twelve facts. Is that normal?

While twelve isn't exactly a record, it's normal not to make it past 20 or so, and that's okay. Simply doing the exercise and thinking about what you have to offer is a positive step. If you're struggling to think more broadly about yourself, try doing the exercise for a friend. Examining someone else's life tends to be more comfortable. Then, after you've written 50 facts about a friend, try the exercise again for yourself. For extra credit, contact your friend and tell her you've written 50 things about her that would be contributions for other people. That in itself would make a lovely gift.

If you need to do less...

When we're struggling or resisting something, it's at that precise point that we can learn the most about ourselves. Because that moment can feel uncomfortable, our instinct is to fight it or escape from it. But to learn, we have to do the opposite: slow down and examine it. Answering these few questions can help you.

When you think of your goal and taking steps towards it, how do you feel?

Whatever the emotion is, allow yourself to feel it. Where is it in your body? What's happening to you physically?

If you're anxious in some way, what might be reasons for you feeling that way?

If you're consistently too busy to make progress towards your goal or are thinking of quitting altogether, why do you think that is? Is it about the goal, the time, or something else?

If your biggest struggle is with time, think of other things you are doing instead of investing in yourself and a goal you care about. Are those choices in your best interest?

When something you're trying to do is provoking a fight or flight reflex, one way to make progress towards it anyway is to make the change small enough so you don't trigger that reflex. For example, imagine your goal is to run more but you can't go for a run 4 times a week for an hour. Try once a week. Still too much? Go for 5 minutes. Not working for you? Walk to the treadmill and touch it. Every day. (A link to an article on this idea is at the end of this guide.)

In thinking of your own goal, how might you "touch the treadmill" so you can make the change smaller and make some kind of progress?

If you want to do more...

Easy: Something you can do in less than 5 minutes

Take the Appreciation Test. (It's at the end of this guide, and a link is also included below.) As you imagine the scenario, pay special attention to how you feel. Then, given the response you choose, imagine how the other person might feel. This is a good exercise in self-awareness and empathy, and will also further broaden your sense of what a contribution can be.

More challenging: Something you can do in less than 15 minutes

Play Internet or Intranet Detective and search for people you find particularly interesting, people whose work you admire as opposed to celebrities.

- What is their online presence like?
- Is it easy to find them and their work?
- Do they have a LinkedIn profile, Twitter account, blog, or other website?
- What do you like and not like about how they present themselves online?

To read, listen to, or watch

Touching the treadmill

- "Touching the treadmill" - Link: <http://workingoutloud.com/blog/touching-the-treadmill?rq=treadmill>

The Appreciation Test

- "The Appreciation Test" - Link: workingoutloud.com/blog/the-appreciation-test

The Appreciation Test

I thought this one would be easy, but I was wrong. Try it for yourself.

Imagine someone just paid you a compliment on something you did, perhaps a presentation at work or something else that evoked a “Nice job!”

What would you do?

- a. Wonder if the person was being sarcastic.
- b. Reject it. “Oh it was nothing.”
- c. Smile awkwardly.
- d. Graciously accept the compliment.

You might think the answer is obvious. But it has taken me decades to get to a comfortable answer, and that’s only after working through all of the possible responses.

The M&Ms Incident

I was about 5 years old when this happened, maybe younger. It was such a trivial incident and yet it stuck with me.

My mother, older siblings, and I visited a neighbor up the block. Her home seemed so neat and orderly. To my mind they were rich, though it was just a one-bedroom home in the Bronx. The woman had M&Ms in a glass bowl, something extraordinary for me because a) in my house the M&Ms would be devoured immediately, and b) we would inevitably break the glass bowl.

She held the bowl out to me. “Would you like some?” My mother gave me a look and shook her head. Afterwards, she explained (or this is how I remember it), that even if people offered something, I wasn’t supposed to take it. My young mind interpreted it as somehow impolite to accept what was offered. Perhaps the person didn’t really mean it, or I didn’t deserve it, or both.

Of course, it’s nice to receive compliments. And yet, for most of my life, each compliment is like that bowl of M&Ms being offered to me. I look at it awkwardly, wondering whether I’m allowed to accept it.

“You look nice today!”

I much prefer to give compliments than to receive them. “You look nice today!” “What a great outfit!” I thought offering such genuine praise was an unambiguously nice thing to do. One day, though, a woman I knew responded with, “So I don’t look so nice on the other days?”

I never expected that. I guess she focused on the word “today” more than “nice” and interpreted it as a kind of insult. It taught me two lessons: to be more thoughtful of how I offer

a compliment, and to realize that other people, like me, may not be comfortable when they get one.

I still offer positive feedback to people, but I try and practice empathy before I do it. How would I receive this if I were them? It makes me more mindful of what I say and how I say it.

How accepting a gift can be a contribution

Last week, I gave a talk at a conference and there were well over a thousand people in the audience. As I walked off stage, I wasn't sure how it went. I had a sense of how well I did or didn't do, but now how it was received. Then, some people came up and congratulated me, and over the course of the day different people would come up to me and say something nice about my presentation.

I thought about this appreciation test. My instinct was to respond with disbelief or some other form of rejection. "Really?" "Oh, it wasn't my best effort."

This time, though, I practiced just accepting it. Sometimes it was as simple as "Thank you. I really appreciate it." Sometimes we would start a conversation and exchange contact information, or even get to know each other a bit.

If a person had gone through the trouble of walking up to me to say something nice, then the least I could do in return would be to graciously accept it. Now, instead of responding with my usual self-defenses, I practice reciprocating with my attention, appreciation, and vulnerability. As the write Stephen Donaldson has said, "In accepting the gift, you honor the giver."