



Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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Getting started

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For more information, including a customizable version of the Circle Guides for your organization, contact john.stepper@workingoutloud.com.

Welcome

Chances are you're reading this because you're looking for some kind of change. Maybe you have something specific you would like to accomplish, or a new interest you'd like to explore. Maybe you want to get better at what you do or seek different career opportunities. Maybe you simply wish that you could feel better about work, or that your organization could be more engaging and collaborative.

Yet even when you truly want change, it can be difficult because people are...messy. We are incredibly resistant when it comes to changing our habits and behaviors. Despite the many change programs available, our individuality makes it difficult for "one size to fit all" and have us experience any meaningful difference.

Thankfully, though, research in the past few decades is helping us understand why we do what we do - what makes us feel more confident, empowered, and willing to put in the effort required to change. Whatever our age or nationality, it turns out we share the same basic intrinsic motivators: we all want a bit more control, a sense of competence and learning, and a feeling of connection - to other people and a purpose bigger than ourselves.

Working Out Loud helps you tap into these intrinsic needs in a way that enables you to be more effective, earns you access to opportunities, and even makes you feel better. As more people in an organization Work Out Loud, the culture becomes more collaborative, agile, and human.

What is Working Out Loud?

The five elements of Working Out Loud are beautifully captured in this sketchnote. Here's a description from workingoutloud.com:

"Working Out Loud is a way to build relationships that can help you in some way, like achieving a goal, developing a skill, or exploring a new topic. Instead of networking to get something, you invest in relationships by making contributions over time, including your work and experiences that you make visible."

When you Work Out Loud, your contributions over time build trust and deepen a sense of relatedness, increasing the chances for cooperation and collaboration. You're more effective because you have access to more people, knowledge, and opportunities that can help you. You feel better too, because your bigger network of meaningful relationships give you a greater sense of control, competence, and connection. You'll almost certainly learn more about what you want and what you have to offer.

All of this leads to more motivation for individuals, and to more agility, innovation, and collaboration for an organization."



Beyond words: How to practice

Even when you know there's a better way, you may be too busy to take advantage of it, or you might feel the change is too big for you to deal with now. A Working Out Loud (WOL) Circle is a peer support method that makes it easy.

In a WOL Circle, you each choose an individual goal and build relationships that can help you with that goal. Over the course of twelve 60-minute sessions, you and 3 to 4 other members of your Circle will learn by doing. Short, practical exercises will help you make connections and unlock access to expertise and ideas. Your Circle can meet in person or via video across locations, and a set of simple structured guides walk you through what to do each week.

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 CIRCLE BASICS

- You **each choose your own goal**.
- It's **confidential** so it feels safe to try things.
- Keeping it to **4-5 people** balances doing & discussing.
- **12 one-hour sessions** allow you to practice & develop new habits.
- **Small steps** help you make progress & build confidence.

The basics of a WOL Circle

While the WOL Circle Guides make it easy to know what to do each week, there are a few things worth reinforcing or explaining.

You start with an individual goal you care about. Each of you in the Circle will pick your own goal, and help each other along the way. 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 more instructions.

A Circle is a safe, confidential space. Members of a Circle will learn better when they're in a supportive environment and don't need to worry about competition or judgment. It's important that members can be open about their goals, their learning, and their struggles. 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 do the exercises. 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 that helps you learn, 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.

Two simple roles can help

When it comes to running the actual meetings, Circles work best when you have two simple but important roles: a Facilitator and a Timekeeper.

The Facilitator helps keep things organized, positive, and engaging, taking care of things like scheduling meetings, and preparing ahead of time. They're not managing the group as much as serving them, helping them have a good experience and leading by example. The Facilitator is a peer like everyone else and has their own goal they want to make progress towards.

The Timekeeper is an even simpler role. They help keep things moving during each meeting, striking a balance for the group between doing and discussing.

The simplest thing is to pick one person for each role, or you may decide to rotate the roles each week.

Some final tips before you start

Some people have such a good experience in their WOL Circle that they called it “positively and genuinely life-changing” and “the best personal & group development I have ever done.” These tips below - in order of importance - will help you have a similar experience.

1. **Keep the logistics simple.** Try to plan all your meetings ahead of time, anticipating holidays and other breaks. If one person can't attend and you can't easily reschedule, have the meeting anyway and help the person catch up next time.
2. **Do something! (Even if you have to take smaller steps.)** There won't be a boss or teacher telling you to do the exercises. It's completely up to you. If your motivation lags or you miss a meeting or you want to give up, as happens naturally with almost any new habit or skill, *shrink the change*. Better to do one small thing than to skip the week entirely.
3. **Have a clear, achievable goal you care about.** By choosing a goal that sparks your genuine interest, you'll be more likely to do the exercises and develop powerful new habits. Simple learning goals tend to work particularly well, such as goals that begin with “I'd like to explore ...” or “I'd like to get better at ...” or “I want to know more people inside and outside my company who ...”
4. **Communicate between meetings.** Whether it's via text, 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.
5. **Help each other.** If you're stuck, ask your Circle for help. 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, and can deepen trust within the Circle.
6. **Relax and enjoy yourself.** Your meetings can be both productive *and* fun. (This photo is from a WOL Circle in Germany that's celebrating their 12th meeting together.) The time you spend thinking about your goals and practicing ways to build meaningful relationships is time well spent. Enjoy it.



WOL in your organization

For the 30 years I worked in big companies, senior managers constantly encouraged us to “cross silos” and become more collaborative. They bemoaned how difficult it was to tap into the knowledge the company already possessed, leading to duplication, repeated mistakes, and a slow pace of change. But even the best organizations struggle with change. They may all want to become more agile, connected, innovative, digital, etc. Yet they know that engagement is decreasing, and that most individuals use only a small fraction of their potential at work.

WOL Circles can be used as a kind of “organizational change that feels good.” The way Circles are designed, they can be readily integrated into on-boarding, leadership development, innovation, digital transformation, diversity, and other 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. Here’s a quote from a Board Member and head of HR at Bosch, a leading company in spreading WOL Circles:

“As working in networks and using digital opportunities are key skills for all of us in the digital age, Working Out Loud (WOL) is something that is important to me. And these skills are also very important for Bosch. WOL Circles are a hands-on method to acquire these skills.

I am impressed by the speed with which the topic has spread within Bosch and by how positive the worldwide feedback is. I am told again and again that the method enthuses and surprises associates with completely different backgrounds because it is so versatile and yet simple.”¹

WOL Circles are now in over 40 countries and a wide range of organizations, including great companies like Bosch, Daimler, Siemens, BMW, ZF, and many more. How about yours?²

Additional resources to help you

There are 3 good ways to learn more or get help.

A good place to start is workingoutloud.com. There you’ll find the free WOL Circle Guides, videos from organizations spreading WOL, a helpful FAQ, a TEDx Talk, and information on the book, *Working Out Loud: For a Better Career and Life*. There’s also a weekly blog that can help you and your organization make work better.

To connect with practitioners around the world, or just to find other Circle members, there are WOL Communities on Facebook and LinkedIn: facebook.com/groups/workingoutloud/ & linkedin.com/groups/4937010

You can also contact me at john.stepper@workingoutloud.com. I enjoy hearing from people interested in WOL, and reply personally to every email.

¹ linkedin.com/pulse/working-out-loud-bosch-interview-its-sponsor-katharina-krentz/

² For more information on how to start, integrate, and scale your own WOL movement, contact me at john.stepper@workingoutloud.com or visit workingoutloud.com/for-your-organization/

What happens in a WOL Circle? 12 Weeks in One Page

Week 1: Attune your attention

In your first week, after getting to know your other Circle members a bit better, each of you will pick your own individual goal. Then you'll take a step towards that goal by creating a "relationship list," an initial list of people related to your goal.

Week 2: Offer your first contributions

In Week 2, you'll make simple contributions to people on your relationship list, deepening relationships in a small way. Just reviewing the list will further attune your attention to your goal, and the small steps you take each week will gradually increase your sense of empowerment.

Week 3: Take three small steps

In Week 3, you'll make a simple adjustment to managing your time, you'll add to your relationship list, and you'll offer another kind of contribution. These small steps will help reinforce and expand your practice.

Week 4: Earn someone else's attention

How you present your contribution can make all the difference. This week, you'll practice refining the way you write your messages and how you approach people in general. These exercises will make your contributions feel more personal and valuable, and more likely to be effective.

Week 5: Make it personal

Most people think far too narrowly about what they have to offer. This week can change that for you. The exercises will help you understand how the broad set of things you may take for granted - what makes you *you* - can serve as the basis for meaningful connections with others.

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 your improved presence to deepen a relationship.

Week 7: Be purposeful

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

Week 8: Make it a habit

Although you've spent seven weeks thinking of your goal in terms of people and contributions, you're still working on making it a habit and mindset. It's natural, for example, to struggle with finding time to work your list or remembering to follow up. This week, you'll explore ways to reinforce your new habit so it takes less effort and feels increasingly natural, and to overcome the inevitable challenges and setbacks. Then you'll practice empathy (again) in a way that might surprise you - and will certainly distinguish you.

Week 9: Explore more original contributions

At this point in your Circle, you're ready to further expand your range of contributions by making more of your work and thinking visible. Even if this is new to some of you or makes you uncomfortable, the exercises this week will help you take a step, allowing you to create something simple that's also generous and useful.

Week 10: 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 offer something which you may never have thought of as a not have previously considered as a contribution.

Week 11: Imagine the possibilities

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

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. In your last exercise, you'll make several additional contributions, including some for yourself. Hold this final meeting over lunch or dinner if you can - or come up with some other creative way to create an environment that's conducive to celebration.