



# Working Out Loud Circle Guide

Version 4.5 - January 2018  
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## Week 10: Become more systematic

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For more information, including a customizable version of the Circle Guides for your organization, contact [john.stepper@workingoutloud.com](mailto:john.stepper@workingoutloud.com).

### What to expect this week

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 contribution.

Suggested Agenda for Week 10	
1. Check-in	10 mins
2. Exercise: The Contribution Checklist	20
3. Exercise: From ad hoc to systematic	10
4. Exercise: Offering vulnerability	15
5. Voice your intention	5

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

"What did you do since our last meeting?" is always a good check-in question, especially when it's asked with genuine curiosity and without judgment. Share any interesting connections or contributions you made, or challenges you faced.

### 2. Exercise: The Contribution Checklist (20 minutes)

So far, you've offered universal contributions like recognition and appreciation. You've shared resources you've found useful. You've made a list of facts that can serve as the basis for shared interests. And still the range of possible contributions can be broader.

Here's a list of ten kinds of contributions you can make, from the simplest you've seen already to those that may take more effort and may also be more valuable.

1. **Offer attention:** Attention is a "universal gift," something everyone has and everyone wants. Offering it can be as simple as pressing a Like button to say "I see you" or "I've paid attention to what you said or did." It could also establish a connection with a person by following them on a social platform or subscribing to their updates.

2. **Show appreciation:** Gratitude is another universal gift. It feels good to give it and receive it, and yet it is perhaps the most underutilized resource we have. Saying "thank you" to someone or giving them credit for their

work can deepen the relationship. Offering public appreciation is a different but related gift, one that's less personal but reaches more people. Try both.

3. **Share interesting or useful resources:** Sharing interesting content and the work of others you admire is a low-risk, low-cost contribution that can help others. You can send it directly - e.g., by talking over coffee or sharing a link by email - or spread it on a social platform where you might @-mention specific people or groups. Be sure to include your rationale for sharing. That makes it more personal and purposeful.

4. **Ask a question:** Vulnerability can be a gift. Asking a question allows others to demonstrate their expertise, especially when you share how you tried to get the answer before asking. When someone helps you, be sure to appreciate their contribution, and make their answer available in such a way that it can help others.

5. **Answer a question:** When you answer a question, you help the person who asked it as well as anyone else who may benefit from your answer in the future. Doing so in an informal, humble way shapes your reputation as someone who is both knowledgeable and generous.

6. **Introduce people:** Thoughtful introductions can provide access to new ideas, new people, and new opportunities. You might connect individuals, or you can introduce people to entire groups, such as online communities related to their goal. The key is to make introductions selectively and to show respect for each person's time.

7. **Offer feedback:** Here you're trying to build on something someone has done in a way that credits the person's original work while also helping others. Your contribution should be positive and constructive, something that advances the work in some way. It could be a question, a suggestion, or a comment about how and why it was useful or interesting to you.

8. **Share your work in progress:** By sharing aspects of your work - what you're doing, why, and how - you may inspire others who are doing similar work, or learn from them, or create possibilities for innovation and collaboration. Frame it in a way it feels less like "Look at me!" and more like "I thought you might be interested in this."

9. **Share your experience:** Reflect on your work. What have you learned - from both failures and successes - that might be useful to someone else? It might be resources you found useful or techniques you've found effective or mistakes that others should avoid. Remember to frame it as a contribution, offering up what you've learned in a way that's helpful to other people.

10. **Offer original ideas:** You needn't limit yourself to work already completed. What opportunities do you see for improvement in the future and what are your constructive ideas? Your opinion or idea can be framed as a contribution, especially when you invite others to contribute their own comments and suggestions. Credit other people who may have inspired you and build on their work wherever possible.



Now, for each category, see if you can list an example of a specific contribution related to your goal. This will serve as a handy checklist for future contributions. Ask your Circle for help when you need it.

1. Attention: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Appreciation: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Useful resources: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Questions: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Answers: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Introductions: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Feedback: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Work in progress: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Experience: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Original ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

### 3. Exercise: From ad hoc to systematic (10 minutes)

For some of you, your relationship list might be growing and becoming a bit unwieldy. This exercise can help. Instead of going through everyone on your relationship list each week, tracking these additional things for each person or organization will help you focus and ensure you don't lose touch.

- The last contribution you made & the date you made it.
- The date you'd like to make another contribution & what that might be.

For example, if you had a good interaction with someone, you might pick a date within a few weeks when you'll make another contribution. Or if it's someone you just met and you're not sure how much you want to invest in the relationship, you might pick a date a few months out. This helps you avoid the "out of sight, out of mind" problem. Instead of trying to remember all of these follow-ups in your head, this simple system enables you to keep in touch with people in a way that involves less stress and fewer mistakes.

## SAMPLE ENTRY ON MY RELATIONSHIP LIST

**Relationship:** Lisa at XYZ Company

**Last contribution:** Email exchange about a possible event  
**Date:** Nov 24, 2017

**Next contributions?**

- Share an update from ABC company;
- Mention upcoming travel dates in 2018 in case we can meet;
- Offer holiday wishes!

**Date?** Within a month

Where should you capture this information? I've used different tools at different times - from pen and paper to spreadsheets to index cards, as described in a blog post "The best system for managing your network."<sup>1</sup>

*"Having a simple, convenient system and going through it regularly means I'll rarely lose touch with someone in my network. And when I'm holding that one card for the one person or organization, it feels different than looking at a row in a crowded spreadsheet. For that moment, I'm focused just on them."*

While some systems are better than others, there is no single ideal way. The best method is one that works for you; one that actually helps you to be mindful of people on it and to make progress deepening relationships; one

<sup>1</sup> [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-best-system-for-managing-your-network](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-best-system-for-managing-your-network)

that's easy and perhaps even sparks joy. Going through your list of relationships should feel like a personal task, not an administrative one.



Whatever system you choose, go through your own relationship list now and add the new bits of information for each person. See if that helps you remember follow-ups you've been meaning to make, or to come up with additional contributions.

#### 4. Exercise: Offering vulnerability (15 minutes)

Sometimes you need something from someone else: advice, information, an introduction. How do you ask? As with your other interactions, the keys are empathy and generosity. Here's a story from Tim Grahl, who helps authors market their books:

*Two authors recently e-mailed me for the first time. The subject line of the first read, "Let's meet." The e-mail shared the author's struggle marketing his book and a request for a phone call so he could "pick my brain" about what he was doing wrong and how to fix it.*

*The subject line of the second e-mail read, "Interview." The e-mail was a request to interview me for his podcast so that he could share my advice to educate his listeners and promote my business.*

*Which one do you think got a response from me?*

Before you ask to "pick someone's brain" or offer an exchange of coffee for an hour of their day, take the time to figure out how the other person can gain something too. *How will the recipient receive my request and is there any way to frame it as a contribution?* It might take some creative thinking on your part, but it will help you stand out and get better results.



Look through your relationship list now, and find someone who could help you. Choose someone to whom you've already offered attention or appreciation, and practice framing your request as a contribution, avoiding phrases like *I want, I need, and I would like to*. Share your message with your Circle to see if they think your message feels like an invitation instead of an imposition, and is "earning someone's attention."

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If you're stuck, send me email at [john.stepper@workingoutloud.com](mailto:john.stepper@workingoutloud.com) to ask for my latest progress chart. Think of it as a safe way to practice asking for something, and try to use what you've learned from previous weeks. I'll be glad you contacted me.

#### 5. Voice your intention (5 minutes)

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

Offer at least one thing from your Contribution Checklist. Every time you do, you're reinforcing your new habits and mindset.



Before the next meeting, I will:

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## FINAL THOUGHT

“Even if they reject your introduction, they’ll appreciate your sensitivity and respect for their time. Practicing empathy is always a good thing to do.”

- [workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-introduce-people-online](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-introduce-people-online)

### If you need to do less...

That was a lot this week. If you didn’t make it through all the exercises, that’s okay. Consider “touching the treadmill.” Shrink the change so you can still make some kind of progress. For example, here’s an easy way you can do less this week and still move forward:

1. Read the contribution checklist.
2. Circle the contributions you are most comfortable with.
3. Go through your relationship list and offer something you circled.

### If you want to do more...

#### Easy: Something you can do in less than 10 minutes

Read “The HR director I wish I knew” for an example of how a simple contribution can quickly lead to an interesting, meaningful connection. Be sure to read the updates at the end. See how many different kinds of contributions you can find from the contribution checklist.<sup>2</sup>

“The HR director I wish I knew”

[workingoutloud.com/blog/the-hr-director-i-wish-i-knew](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-hr-director-i-wish-i-knew)

#### More challenging: Something you can do in less than 20 minutes

Amanda Palmer, a singer and songwriter, spoke about vulnerability as a gift in her TED talk “The Art of Asking” (and later wrote a book with the same title). It’s based in part on her years as a performance artist on the street asking for contributions. Here’s a quote from her book:

*“Asking for help with shame says: You have the power over me. Asking with condescension says: I have the power over you. But asking for help with gratitude says: We have the power to help each other.”*

When Amanda Palmer worked as a living statue, she could have simply said, “I would like you to give me a dollar.” Instead she found a way to ask for that dollar so that it felt like an invitation and a connection. Years later, when she asked for money on Kickstarter to launch a new album, twenty-five thousand individuals donated a total of more than \$1.2 million.

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<sup>2</sup> There are two points here: 1) you build trust with contributions over time; and 2) sometimes you can do that pretty quickly.

Watch her TED talk. As you do, reflect on how you ask for help. Is it with shame or is it with gratitude? Does it feel like an imposition or an invitation?

Video - “The art of asking” by Amanda Palmer  
[ted.com/talks/amanda\\_palmer\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_asking](https://www.ted.com/talks/amanda_palmer_the_art_of_asking)

## To read, listen to, or watch

“How to ask for help”  
[workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-ask-for-help](https://www.workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-ask-for-help)

“Asking for help”  
[workingoutloud.com/blog/asking-for-help](https://www.workingoutloud.com/blog/asking-for-help)

*Working Out Loud: For a Better Career and Life*  
Chapter 6 - Leading with Generosity  
Chapter 14 - Deepening Relationships through Contribution  
Chapter 15 - How to Approach People

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Q: This seems like a lot of contributions! Do I really need to do all of this?*

No, you don't need to do all of this. The Contribution Checklist is just a guide to help you think broadly about what you might offer. Remember, the goal is to deepen relationships. You can usually accomplish that with recognition, appreciation, gratitude, and other small gifts. Gifts like original content, etc. are wonderful but only in addition to *small gifts, freely given*. If all you do is generously offer small gifts in a way that shows empathy, that is a lovely and incredibly powerful habit.

*Q: Asking for help feels extremely uncomfortable.*

The more you focus on empathy and generosity, and the more you do so without expectations imposed on another person, the less discomfort you'll feel. Approaching people can naturally touch on some of our deep-rooted fears and insecurities. But instead of avoiding those feelings, try channeling them into positive emotions that can genuinely lead to contributions to others. All you can do is try to make your request feel more like an invitation than an imposition. (You can learn more about how to do this in the additional exercise featuring Amanda Palmer at the end of this guide.)

*Q: What if people don't respond or, worse, they reject me?*

Tim Grahl, author of *Your First 1000 Copies*, encourages writers to build relationships with readers and other people who can help them raise awareness about their work. He offered some excellent advice for people seeking help from others:

*When you're in outreach mode, revoke your right to be offended. You're not always going to get the answer you want. People are going to turn you down or just ignore you from time to time. That's a part of the game; that's a part of life. When you don't get a favorable response, take a breath and move forward. Keep looking for ways to help people. Always assume the best of people.*

When you don't get a response, it's easy to be upset and make up some negative story about why you didn't get a response. Instead, assume the best of people—they're simply busy or have some other legitimate reason—and focus on what else you can do to be helpful. That mindset ensures your requests don't feel like burdens, and makes it more likely people will respond favorably in the future.