



# Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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## Week 5: Make it personal

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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

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.

Suggested Agenda for Week 4	
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. Voice your intention	5

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

For this week's check-in, share how you're feeling about your goal and the progress you're making towards it. It's likely that many of you are having similar experiences and reactions, and sharing them can be helpful. If you're unsure about your goal or simply not making progress, ask your Circle for advice. Consider shrinking the change you're trying to make, or switching to something else that sparks your curiosity and interest.

Remember that it's not a competition, that progress for each person is personal and idiosyncratic. Celebrate freely whenever someone takes a step, allowing yourself to draw inspiration and encouragement from each other.

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

Have you ever been in a room of strangers and discovered someone went to the same school as you? Or grew up in the same hometown? Or had kids the same age? Simply discovering you have a fact in common makes you feel differently about that person. Somehow, you feel you can relate to them better.

Though such occurrences may seem random, you can increase the chances of them happening when you're more mindful of the many "facts about you" and that sharing them in the right way can deepen a relationship. Listing such facts in this exercise and discussing them in your Circle can help you make the shift from offering universal gifts to making contributions that are personal and specific to you. Often, their personal nature

increases their value both to you and to recipients. For example, here are ten facts about you that can form the basis of a shared experience with someone, and help you think more broadly about what you have to offer:

- 10 POSSIBLE FACTS ABOUT YOU**
1. Whether you have children, and facts about them.
  2. Where you were born.
  3. Places you've lived.
  4. Where your parents came from.
  5. Places you've worked.
  6. Vacations you've taken.
  7. Physical challenges you had to deal with.
  8. Career challenges you've had.
  9. Schools you attended.
  10. Things you love doing.

When I first did this exercise, I struggled because I felt the things on my list had to be particularly remarkable or extraordinary. Now I know that any part of my experience might be interesting to *someone* else if I frame it as a contribution. (You'll practice this later in this meeting.) Here are a few from my list that have each been the basis of a connection with other people. Thinking of them as "contributions" had the effect of making me more curious about other people's facts. It led me to ask more questions and listen more intently to the answers.

- MY OWN FACTS**
1. I was born in New York City and lived there my entire life.
  2. I have five children.
  3. I'm half-German and half-Italian.
  4. My wife is Japanese.
  5. I've spent a lot of time traveling in Japan & Germany.
  6. I became a vegetarian in my 40s.
  7. My mother had diabetes.
  8. I attended Regis High School & Columbia University.
  9. I studied computer science.
  10. After working in corporations for 30 years, I started my own business.



Now try to write **50 facts about you**. 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*.

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**3. Discuss your “facts about you” (10 minutes)**

Discuss whether that was hard or easy for each of you, and share some of your facts. Look for commonalities and connections, as well as for things you find remarkable. Try to see the human being behind the facts.

The author Haruki Murakami once said, “The fact that I’m me and no one else is one of my greatest assets.” But at work, most of us feel compelled to hide behind a mask of cool professionalism. As a result, our “greatest asset” is reduced to an impersonal sameness, and the chances for human connection are greatly reduced.

Instead of hiding those assets, learn to share them selectively and frame them as personal contributions. Help each other to see the wide range of gifts you have to offer and who might benefit from them. Try to add to each other’s lists. People in your Circle will likely see things about you that you’ve long taken for granted or overlooked.

**4. Exercise: Make a personal connection (20 minutes)**

In this exercise, you’re going to use one of your facts as the basis of a contribution to someone. Perhaps it’s something helpful related to raising your children, or sharing an experience you’ve had with someone you think might appreciate it. It’s similar to what you did last week when you “earned someone’s attention” except this time it’s not related to your goal - it’s personal.

Here’s an example. At one point in my career, I was supporting a senior business person who could be quite gruff and intimidating. If I had a relationship list back then, he would certainly have been on it, but all I could have thought to offer him at the time would have been strictly business. Then I discovered that his son was applying to high schools in New York City, and I mentioned I went to Regis High School and liked it very much. His eyes lit up. They were thinking of that school but didn’t know much about it. “Would you tell us about it? Maybe talk to our son?” he asked. We spoke at length over coffee, and he was extremely grateful. We had deepened our relationship for sure.

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](mailto:john.stepper@workingoutloud.com) and tell me about your favorite holiday destination. I will enjoy learning about new places, and I'll respond with my own favorite destination. You'll see how easy it is to make a contribution and a connection.

## 5. Voice your intention (5 minutes)

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

Write down what you'll do before your next Circle meeting. You might offer more contributions before your next meeting or choose to do some of the additional exercises. It might be as simple as reflecting on your list of 50 facts, or sharing it with your partner or a friend.

If you do something before your next meeting, consider sharing what you did with your Circle members before the meeting. Any progress during the week is good, and by sharing it you may help others take a step and make progress too.



*Before the next meeting, I will:*

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### FINAL THOUGHT

"We don't need to shed our individuality when we come to the office.  
'People are our greatest asset' only if we let them be real people,  
only if we let ourselves be our true selves."

- [workingoutloud.com/blog/taking-off-the-mask](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/taking-off-the-mask)

## If you need to do less...

This is a good exercise for everyone at this point in your Circle, particularly if you're still having trouble making progress or you're uncertain or uncomfortable with your goal. When you're struggling or resisting something, it's at that precise point that you can learn the most about yourself. Because that moment can feel uncomfortable, your instinct might be to fight it or escape from it. But to learn, you 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?

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

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

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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?

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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?

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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 smaller so you don't trigger that reflex. For example, let's say your goal is to run on the treadmill three times a week for an hour, but you're not going to the gym at all. Try once a week for 30 minutes instead. Still too much? Just walk to the treadmill and touch it.<sup>1</sup>

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

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## If you want to do more...

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

This is a short version of the Appreciation Test.<sup>2</sup> 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 next?

1. Wonder if the person was being sarcastic.
2. Reject it. "Oh it was nothing."
3. Smile awkwardly.
4. Graciously accept the compliment.

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<sup>1</sup> For more background on "touching the treadmill" and why it works, read [workingoutloud.com/blog/touching-the-treadmill](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/touching-the-treadmill).

<sup>2</sup> The full version is at [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-appreciation-test](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-appreciation-test)

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 next time someone offers you a compliment, pay special attention to how you feel and what you do. Imagine what the other person is feeling - both when they offer the compliment and when they receive your response.

This is an exercise in both self-awareness and empathy, and can help you experience how even accepting a gift, when done graciously and gratefully, can be a kind of contribution. As the writer Stephen Donaldson has said, "In accepting the gift, you honor the giver."

### **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**

"Taking off the mask"

[workingoutloud.com/blog/taking-off-the-mask](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/taking-off-the-mask)

"Touching the treadmill"

[workingoutloud.com/blog/touching-the-treadmill](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/touching-the-treadmill)

*Working Out Loud: For a Better Career and Life*

Chapter 5 - Building Relationships

Chapter 14 - Deepening Relationships through Contribution

### **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.

*Q: I'm not comfortable with sharing personal things at work.*

Don't feel forced to share anything you don't want to share, or to post any personal information publicly. The point of the exercise is to help you be mindful that your possible contributions can include a wide range of things you already have, and that sharing a common experience with someone can be the basis for a connection, for deepening a sense of relatedness. Week by week, you're discovering that your spectrum of contributions is even more diverse and colorful than you might have imagined.