Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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Created by John Stepper

Week 8: Make it a habit

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

What to expect this week

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.

Suggested Agenda for Week 8	
1. Check-in	10 mins
2. Exercise: The Habit Checklist	20
3. Exercise: Create your own progress chart	10
4. Exercise: "I'd like to introduce you to…"	15
5. Voice your intention	5

1. Check-in (10 minutes)

During this week's check-in, consider questions like "What has been the best thing so far for you?" It may be new relationships, new opportunities, or just new ways of thinking about your goals. Focus on listening to each other, and be sure to celebrate any progress.

2. Exercise: The Habit Checklist (20 minutes)

I used to think of myself as a procrastinator, someone who puts things off and doesn't have a lot of self-discipline. Then I learned that those labels and behaviors were less about my DNA - the kind of person I am - and more about my habits. And habits can change.

Common estimates are that it takes three to ten weeks of deliberate practice to develop a new habit. As I've experimented with changing my own habits, I've distilled the techniques I found most helpful into a Habit Checklist - 8 things you can do to develop or sustain certain behaviors. Without exaggeration, applying these simple techniques have changed my life.[1] The more I use them, the more I feel a sense of self-efficacy, a feeling that I could do anything if I put in the effort.

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[1] My first experiments with changing my habits began with diet and exercise, and I've been experimenting ever since. For example: workingoutloud.com/blog/the-prospect-of-premature-death-didnt-make-me-change-so-i-tried-this-instead

You'll use the Habit Checklist now and in the coming weeks as you try to make Working Out Loud a habit. Whenever I get stuck developing any new habit or skill, I look at this list and pick an adjustment to make.

☐ **Set achievable goals:** It's good to dream big, and yet big ambitions can be so daunting that you trigger internal resistance and never take a step. To make your goals and ambitions actionable, "shrink the change," breaking it up into nearer-term goals you can do something about.

☐ **Take small steps:** The progress principle is a powerful thing. So when you're stuck, reduce the size of your next step ("touch the treadmill") so you can continue advancing. Remember that any progress is good.

☐ **Chart your progress:** By tracking what you're doing, you become more mindful of your efforts throughout the day. Even one measure related to your goal, like the time you spent on it or whether or not you made a contribution that day, will greatly improve your chances of making progress. (You'll create your own chart in the next exercise.)

☐ **Structure your environment:** So much of what we do is based on impulsive, unconscious choices in response to triggers around us. Knowing that, you can purposefully adapt your environment to help you make progress. This can include adjustments to your schedule, your workspaces, your technology and anything else that makes it easier to do what you want to do and harder to engage in negative behaviors.

☐ **Expect setbacks:** All learning and development includes challenges and mistakes. Feeling bad about them triggers resistance. Instead, view each setback as a natural and necessary learning opportunity, and channel your energy into doing better next time.

☐ **Reflect on and celebrate success:** We're wired to focus on issues and problems, and that can be a disincentive. So it's important to periodically reflect on the progress you've made and reward yourself in some way, including simply allowing yourself to be proud of what you've accomplished.

☐ **Find a friend:** Whether it's simply talking through what you're trying to do or actually going through the process together (like you're doing with your Circle), support from someone else can help you get through challenges and inspire you to keep going.

☐ **Picture the way you'd like life to be**: Articulating a vision of the future helps you tap into your sense of purpose, reminding you why you're doing what you're doing.

Think of how the habit checklist applies to your goal and to your progress so far. For each item, identify **one** adjustment that could help you make progress.

☐ **Set achievable goals** - *e.g., Reflect on your progress too far and see if a sub-goal might be appropriate.*

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☐ **Take small steps** - *e.g., What's one thing you could do today?*

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☐ **Chart your progress** - *e.g., One or two metrics related to what you need to do to make progress.*

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☐ **Structure your environment** - *e.g., Block time in your calendar; Turn off notifications on your phone.*

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☐ **Expect setbacks** - *e.g., Pick something that isn't going well and write down what you can learn from it. Remind yourself that setbacks are a natural part of the process.*

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☐ **Reflect on and celebrate success** - *e.g., What's something you did or learned recently that you wouldn't have done before your Circle?*

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☐ **Find a friend** - *e.g., While you're in a Circle, share your progress and challenges in between meetings.*

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☐ **Picture the way you'd like life to be** - *e.g., Pick a visible reminder of what's in your letter from your future self and place it somewhere you can see it regularly*

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3. Exercise: Create your own progress chart (10 minutes)

The idea of a progress chart has been around for a long time. I created my first one when I was struggling to make progress on my book.[2] I charted how many hours I spent writing each day, and that made it clear I wasn't spending nearly as many hours as I thought. And that inescapable insight drove me to change my behavior.

I'm not alone at misjudging my effort. Self-reports on common activities such as how much we eat or drink, or how much time we spend on our phones, are notoriously inaccurate. Maintaining a progress chart does two things: it helps you gather objective data about actions you're taking, and it makes you mindful of that data. No actions, no progress.

Your chart can be as simple as a monthly calendar, with a space to write down one or two metrics related to your goal. Say, for example, your goal is "to expand my network of people in the HR area," your chart might include:

- Did you search/read/watch something from your network? (Y/N)
- Did you work on your goal at all? (Y/N)
- The number of contributions you made
- The amount of time you spent on any activity related to your goal

The key is to put your chart in a place where you'll see it multiple times per day. That's what makes you more mindful of the behaviors you're trying to change. My handwritten chart is next to the bathroom mirror, and I update it in the morning and evening. Though it only takes a few seconds, it makes it clear where I need to make adjustments.

Decide what you will track on your progress chart.

Progress Chart Title:

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[2] The inspiration for my first chart was an uncomfortable question from my wife. "How's the book coming along?"- workingoutloud.com/blog/hows-the-book-coming-along

Now create your physical chart. You can use a blank monthly calendar or draw your own on a blank sheet of paper. Then decide where you'll put it. Finally, share your chart with your Circle, either in the meeting now or by sending a photo of the chart you made and where you placed it.

4. Exercise: "I'd like to introduce you to…" (15 minutes)

Item number six on the contribution checklist includes introducing people. Yet it was only in the last few years I realized I had been introducing people incorrectly my entire life. Here's an example of what I mean. Suppose you think two people would benefit from knowing each other. You might think that a nice thing to do would be to send an email to the two of them to make the connection.

AN INTRODUCTION LACKING EMPATHY

Hi, Sally and Bob.

You're both doing such great work that I thought you should definitely know each other!

I'll leave it to you two to connect.

Thanks!
John

This is extremely common. It's also lazy and shows a lack of empathy. Why? Because when you send an email like this, even if it's well-intentioned, you burden the recipients with an obligation they never asked for. What you should do instead is ask each person *individually* if you can make the introduction, allowing them to opt out ("Thanks, John, but I'm too busy now"), possibly saving everyone some time and potential embarrassment. Like the exercise in Week 4, this is an opportunity to practice empathy. As you write your email, put yourself in the shoes of the recipient and think how you would feel if you were them. Be sure to provide three things:

1. Context: what motivated you to want to introduce the other person?
2. Value: how will they each benefit from the introduction?
3. Permission: ask for explicit permission before making the introduction.

A BETTER INTRODUCTION, ASKING FOR PERMISSION

Hi, Sally.

Last week I had lunch with Bob Smith who's working on a project very similar to yours. He's done a lot of research and I thought it might help if the two of you met and shared some of what you've learned.

Would it be okay if I make the introduction?

Thanks!
John

You might object that the first kind of introduction is such a common practice that it's okay to do it. Or perhaps the recipients shouldn't be so precious about their time. But if you truly intend the introduction to be a contribution, then you should ask each recipient first and make it easy for them to decline your offer.

📌 Scan your relationship list now and write down the names of two people that would benefit from an introduction. If you find this difficult, do the exercise with members of your Circle, perhaps by introducing them to someone you think is related to their goal or would otherwise be helpful or interesting to know.

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📌 Draft a short email to each person, offering context, value, and the chance to opt in. If they both agree, THEN you can send a note introducing them to each other.

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5. Voice your intention (5 minutes)

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

The key to developing any habit is small steps, practiced over time, with feedback and peer support. The simple additional exercises this week will help you take a small step. Sharing what you did with your Circle creates the opportunity for feedback and support.

📌 *Before the next meeting, I will:*

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FINAL THOUGHT

"Every day, in the morning and the evening, I looked at my chart for a few minutes. There were no great epiphanies…In a few minutes each day, the chart reminds me of what I need to do to maintain balance in my life and, when I'm out of balance, what adjustments I might make the following day. I gradually became happier after a few weeks.

The thing I learned was this: You shouldn't wait for a happy life. By taking small steps towards it now and charting your progress, you can gradually build habits that can make each day a happier one."

- workingoutloud.com/blog/how-this-one-simple-chart-made-me-happier-in-6-weeks

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If you need to do less…

If you do only one thing this week, make a progress chart and keep it where you can see it throughout the day. If you track even one thing related to your goal (the number of contributions you made, for example), that will help make you more mindful of your goal and steps you're taking towards it. In *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin referred to her progress chart as a "Resolutions Chart." She felt that her chart made the biggest difference in her search for better habits and a happier life.

> *"The single most effective step for me had been to keep my Resolutions Chart…By providing an opportunity for constant review and accountability, the Chart kept me plugging away."*

If you want to do more…

Easy: Something you can do in less than 10 minutes

Look at your habit checklist and make one of the adjustments. It could be as simple as taping your progress chart to your bathroom mirror, or blocking out time in your calendar for doing something related to your goal, or reviewing your "Letter from Your Future Self" ("*Picture the way you'd like life to be*"). Any step you take will reinforce your sense of control and help increase your motivation.

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

Read and reflect on the following article. How might this apply to your own contributions? How do you handle responses (or the lack thereof) from others?

""You can be a delicious, ripe peach and there will still be people in the world that hate peaches."
workingoutloud.com/blog/can-delicious-ripe-peach-will-still-people-world-hate-peaches

To read, listen to, or watch

The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg
amazon.com/Power-Habit-What-Life-Business/dp/081298160X/

"How this one simple chart made me happier in 6 weeks"
workingoutloud.com/blog/how-this-one-simple-chart-made-me-happier-in-6-weeks

"PSA: Email Introduction Etiquette"
cbinsights.com/blog/double-optin-intro/

"How to introduce people online"
workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-introduce-people-online

Working Out Loud: For a Better Career and Life
    Chapter 8 - A Growth Mindset
    Chapter 13 - Making It a Habit
    Chapter 19 - Shipping and Getting Better

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Are some things on the Habit Checklist more important than others?
The two things I found most useful in attempting to change a range of habits are charting my progress and structuring my environment. It's why I included creating a progress chart as an exercise this week. (You can read dozens of posts about my successes, failures, and learning at workingoutloud.com/search?q=habits.)