



WORKING OUT LOUD

BY JOHN STEPPER AND JO LOUDON

As we face greater employment uncertainty we know we are responsible for our own career and that the traditional career planning advice no longer applies. John Stepper suggests that by adopting a new way of working, we can change our lives, take charge of our careers and deepen relationships. John suggests we lead with generosity, make our work visible and frame it as a contribution, instead of networking to get something.

Jo Loudon interviewed John Stepper, to learn about working out loud and how it can help people find meaning, create new habits and work towards fulfilment in their lives and at work.

What are the origins of working out loud? Is it a new phenomenon?

Though the ideas have been building for a few decades, the term itself first appeared about six years ago when Bryce Williams described it with a formula: Working Out Loud = Observable Work + Narrating Your Work. I expanded that definition to focus on relationships and make it more purposeful. I sometimes refer to it as "Dale Carnegie meets the Internet," combining the conventional wisdom about relationships with the power and reach of modern technology.

It's not new. I'm just making it easier for more people to practice it.

How did you get involved in working out loud?

In 2012, I had just introduced an enterprise social network into my firm, a large global bank. Like many others at the time, I thought this would change everything. The new platform could give individuals greater access to learning and more opportunities, and thus more

control over their career and life. It could give the firm a more open, connected culture while improving the digital literacy of its staff.

But soon it was obvious that the platform wasn't enough. While most people understood they would benefit from building their network and making their work more visible, they didn't have the habit of working that way. That led me to research habit change, and develop Working Out Loud circles and a process that enables anyone to build a network toward a goal they care about in 12 weeks.

What are the elements of working out loud?

There are five elements: purposeful discovery, relationships, generosity, visible work, and a growth mindset. More than just making your work visible, you regularly frame what you're doing as a contribution and as a way to deepen relationships. You do so with a goal in mind and with a growth mindset, a perspective that with effort and persistence you can become better at almost anything. That last element help you be more open and resilient.

The elements are interrelated, and people tend to emphasise different elements depending on their attitudes and aptitudes. The more you embrace each element, the more you increase your chances of making your work and life better. Combined, the five elements create an open, generous, and connected approach to work and life.

Working Out Loud circles have been adopted around the world and across industries. What do you think are the strengths of these circles?

Circles are powerful because they offer

people an easy way to make meaningful progress in a way that's authentic and fulfilling. The circles are small, just 4-5 people, and confidential. And the free circle guides help each member follow a simple process. You write down a simple goal you care about, share it with your trusted group, and take a few steps over 12 weeks to build relationships with people who can help you. Small steps, practiced over time, with feedback and peer support. That's the key to developing any new habit.

The most common feedback I get from people is about how their circle empowered them, liberated them. Some say it changed their life. When circles spread across an organisation, it changes the culture.

Helping more people spread circles in their organisation is what I'm most excited about now.

Is there an assumed level of social-media savvy for working out loud or is it something that can be done offline?

You can work out loud over coffee or email. But when you use the social platforms, you get a range of benefits. Using them amplifies who you are and what you do, extends your reach, expands your set of contributions and how you can offer them. If you're not familiar with these platforms, the circle guides give you a convenient way to get started. For a number of people, their first-ever tweet on Twitter is "Reading *Working Out Loud*" by @johnstepper" I absolutely love it when I see that and I reply each time.

Being social-media savvy helps, of course, but it's absolutely not a requirement.

Working out loud doesn't have to mean sharing things publicly.

How has International Working Out Loud Week contributed to the proliferation of the working out loud concept?

It happens twice a year in May and November, and it helps spread the word and introduce more people to the practice. It's also a time of more experimentation with people from around the world sharing the many ways they choose to work out loud.

Do you have any strategies for introducing working out loud into a business culture that's resistant?

There are a growing number of ways. The most common way is simply talking about working out loud at career development or networking events. Most organisations already have such events and it's easy to leverage them. People sign up for Working Out Loud circles right at the event. The record so far is having 120% of the people sign up! (After everyone who attended signed up, word spread and more joined.)

Other ways are to tie into existing programs. For example, working out loud serves as a natural complement to formal knowledge management programs, and to human resources talent programs, helping employees engage global, virtual organisations. It's also an excellent complement to diversity and inclusion programs, because the practice creates a more open way of working that humanises the firm.

Are there ways in which you have seen working out loud fail?

The practice itself is so simple and unambiguously good that the only failure is not trying. After all, it's fundamentally about making contributions to other people and deepening relationships. The biggest challenge for circles is logistics, simply

getting people to meet. So some circles can't make it through the 12 weeks, and I'm working on a range of ways to make circles simpler and to provide more support and encouragement throughout the process.

How is it possible to working out loud in businesses with closed intellectual property or sensitive information?

Working out loud doesn't have to mean sharing things publicly. Many companies already have internal social networks or social intranets and these are tailor-made for working out loud. There, employees can make their work visible on the corporate network and build relationships across the firm without worrying about leaking things outside the company.

Even internally, of course, you needn't share things with the entire company. For companies with particularly sensitive information, I'd say two things. First is that even in highly-regulated industries, most of what people do is not highly sensitive, so there are plenty of safe places to start. Also, even for employees handling the most sensitive information, the elements of working out loud still apply. Name a goal; list people who can help with that goal; and make contributions that can help deepen the relationships with those people.

What is a good place to start for someone who has just heard about working out loud?

The best way is to read the book and form your own circle. The guides are free and easy to follow, and people see results - and feel better - as soon as their first meeting.

What are the risks of working out loud?

The biggest risk is to people and processes that rely on control and closed

systems. For example, if you're a middle manager and you're used to having complete power over your staff - their performance ratings and promotions, for example - then you're at risk of losing some of that power. By working out loud, the employee has taken more control over their reputation, including public feedback on their work. And their expanded network gives them access to more people and jobs than just those approved by their boss.

What do you see as the future for working out loud?

I aspire to spread this simple practice to millions of people. And in doing so, I hope to help practitioners around the world adapt working out loud to many different, specific contexts.

In the future, for example, I'd like to see nurse in hospitals working out loud both to improve how they feel about their job as well as their effectiveness. The same would be true for salespeople or project managers or factory workers. Working out loud would be part of the evolved enterprise, where individuals can have a voice and the skills to contribute, connect, and collaborate in a way that's good for them and good for their organisation.

John Stepper helps people access a better career and life - and helps organisations create a more open, connected culture - by spreading the practice of working out loud. He blogs weekly at workingoutloud.com and johnstepper.com.

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