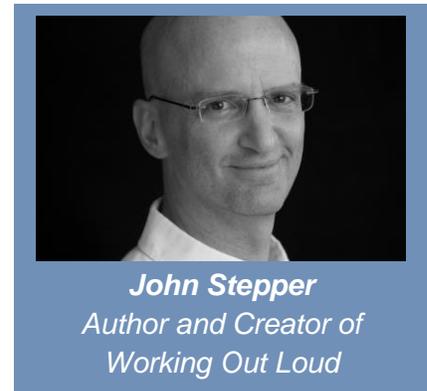


WORKING OUT LOUD WITH JOHN STEPPER

John Stepper is the founder of Working Out Loud, a practice designed to create more collaborative organizational cultures and help individuals access a better career and life. The Working Out Loud movement has spread to over 40 countries and a wide range of organizations including Merck, Daimler, and Siemens. John Stepper authored *Working Out Loud: For a Better Career and Life* and has been featured in a TEDx talk.



In February 2019, APQC spoke with John Stepper about Working Out Loud and how knowledge management professionals can use it to increase collaboration and knowledge sharing in their organizations.

WHAT IS WORKING OUT LOUD?

Everyone knows that collaboration brings significant personal and career benefits. And yet, many people don't do it. Much like diet and exercise, we know it's good for us, but we feel like it's too hard or we don't have time.

The Working Out Loud (WOL) methodology is designed to help people ease into collaboration and experience its benefits quickly and consistently, so that it becomes a habit. The methodology focuses on "WOL circles," which are small groups of people who meet for an hour a week over the course of 12 weeks. Stepper developed [guides](#) for each week with exercises to help participants identify their personal collaboration goals, develop trusted relationships, and practice collaborative behaviors.

Over time and through social proof, WOL can—and has—spread across entire organizations. In so doing, it boosts employee engagement, self-determination, transparency, and knowledge sharing.

HOW THE IDEA STARTED

The idea for WOL started with the rise of enterprise social media. Stepper was working at Deutsche Bank when the company rolled out an enterprise social platform in 2010. He was thrilled about the potential of the system to help employees work more collaboratively and with greater transparency. "I thought, this is going to be the future. I can make my work visible and get public feedback on it, so I can take control of my own reputation and performance evaluation. I can reach anybody in the company and any level," said Stepper.

But Stepper soon realized that nobody cared about enterprise social. People were too busy to use it, weren't sure what to use it for, or thought they would sound stupid. He tried a few different approaches to get people to see the potential of the new tools. He evangelized, taught

courses, and coached individuals. Then Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, inspired the creation of "lean-in circles": small peer-support groups that provide space for women to share ideas, gain skills, and seek advice. Stepper saw that a similar model could be applied to help people learn how to collaborate and share their work.

The future of learning is social and self-directed.

—John Stepper

"I could use that same structure, where people help each other instead of relying on a coach or trainer, and add more of a curriculum to make it a guided mastery program. You start with very small steps and gradually expand your range. It's a scalable, lightweight way to do experiential learning," said Stepper.

HOW WORKING OUT LOUD CAN SCALE

WOL can scale across the enterprise, but it is much more successful if it starts at the grassroots. If leadership tells staff they need to start working out loud, WOL will become just another "initiative." To get WOL to work at the enterprise level, you need to start small and secure social proof of the methodology's benefits at your company.

When Stepper works with organizations, he doesn't start by talking to managers or HR. Instead, he talks about the methodology's benefits for different employee groups and lets circles form organically. Then, management can help scale WOL by building it into existing workflows and programs, such as employee onboarding. "I try to avoid, at all costs, having WOL be part of a program from the beginning. When it feels like an employee-led movement, that's very different from the boss telling you what to do," said Stepper.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Stepper recommended several ways that organizations can measure the success and impact of WOL. First, survey WOL circle participants. Ask them about how WOL has changed how they work, their ability to use different tools and work with different people, and how they feel about the company. Stepper recommends tying survey questions to company goals where possible.

Another way to gauge success is by looking at the metrics KM professionals know well: the number of knowledge content items published and accessed, the number of posts in collaboration forums, and so on. "WOL circles naturally increase the supply and demand of knowledge. If you see an uptick in activity on enterprise social and collaboration platforms, that shows you've intrinsically motivated people to collaborate and contribute more," said Stepper.

HOW KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT CAN USE THIS APPROACH

Knowledge management and WOL share common goals: getting people to share their knowledge, learn from others, and work better together. For KM professionals interested in applying this methodology at their own organizations, Stepper recommends, "try it yourself."

Form a circle with colleagues, at or outside work, to experience the benefits personally. Then look for an easy entry point at your company. “The early entry point—the 1 percent of people who are naturally open to this kind of thing—is going to be different at every company. It might be a community of practice, a diversity group, or the KM team itself,” said Stepper.

SCALING IT

After you have started at least one circle at your company and achieved some success, have an event or workshop. Tell people about the methodology, share your own success stories, and offer some tips for getting started. As more circles form, collect feedback and share the results with management to gain additional visibility and start building WOL into existing programs and structures.

WOL can boost engagement in the organization’s current KM approaches, such as communities of practice (CoPs), lessons learned, and enterprise social. For example, many CoPs have members who are interested in the community topic but shy about contributing content and participating in discussions. Circles can provide a “safe space” to help these people get comfortable with speaking up, asking questions, and sharing their ideas.

Working Out Loud circles naturally increase the supply and demand of knowledge.

—John Stepper

TACKLING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Digital transformation is sweeping the world of business, with companies large and small investing huge amounts in technology additions and upgrades. This is a pivotal time for KM, because critical knowledge can be lost when people change to new systems and ways of working. The change fatigue brought about by the influx of new tech can also chip away at employee engagement in KM approaches. But WOL can help.

Stepper said that organizations can use WOL to reframe digital transformation in a more employee-driven way. WOL circle guides walk participants through ways to use digital tools—like Twitter and LinkedIn—for their own personal goals. The KM team can use the approaches in the guides, or perhaps create dedicated circles, to help employees discover how new enterprise tools can serve their intrinsic needs.

INNOVATION

Especially as the world becomes more interconnected through technology, people are realizing that the best innovation happens when people share openly and work together. But many organizations still cling to the old way of thinking about innovation as something that lone geniuses and secretive R&D teams can do. KM and WOL can help organizations disrupt those old ways of thinking by building the individual habits and organizational structures necessary to enable more open, collaborative, knowledge-sharing cultures.

ABOUT APQC

APQC helps organizations work smarter, faster, and with greater confidence. It is the world's foremost authority in benchmarking, best practices, process and performance improvement, and knowledge management. APQC's unique structure as a member-based nonprofit makes it a differentiator in the marketplace. APQC partners with more than 500 member organizations worldwide in all industries. With more than 40 years of experience, APQC remains the world's leader in transforming organizations. Visit us at www.apqc.org, and learn how you can make best practices your practices.