MY WORKSHOP TOOLS™



FACILITATOR GUIDE

THE FIRST 30 MINUTES

How you open a workshop determines how the whole session goes

Overview

The first 30 minutes of any workshop are not just a warm-up — they are the session. In those opening minutes, participants decide whether they trust you, whether this is worth their full attention, and how much of themselves they are willing to bring into the room. Get the opening right, and everything that follows is easier. Miss it, and you spend the rest of the day trying to win back a group that checked out before you even got started.

This guide gives you a practical, step-by-step approach to opening a My Workshop Tools™ session with genuine confidence and energy. It covers how to walk in ready, how to set expectations without sounding like a policy memo, how to get participation going from the first minute, and how to launch your first activity in a way that sets the standard for everything that follows.

You do not need to be a seasoned facilitator to nail the opening. You need a clear structure, a few key phrases, and the willingness to lead the room before the room leads you. This guide gives you all three.

NAVIGATION

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INTRODUCTION

Before We Start: Why the Opening Is Everything

Here is something no facilitator manual says out loud: your participants have already started evaluating you before you open your mouth. The moment they walk into the room — or log into the virtual session — they are scanning. Is this person prepared? Do they look like they want to be here? Is this going to be worth my time? They are not being difficult. They are being human.

Research on adult learning consistently shows that participants form a strong first impression within the first five minutes of a facilitated session. That impression shapes how much they participate, how much they retain, and how they describe the session to colleagues afterward. Five minutes. That is not a lot of runway.

If you are facilitating a My Workshop Tools™ workshop for the first time, you may feel pressure around the opening. That is completely normal. Many first-time facilitators either over-prepare the opening to the point of sounding scripted or under-prepare it because they figure they will just "go with the flow." Both approaches tend to backfire.

Here is the reframe: the opening is not a performance. It is a conversation starter. Your job in the first 30 minutes is not to dazzle the room — it is to make the room feel safe enough to engage. That means being clear, being human, and overseeing the space without dominating it. It means setting up the conditions for good work, not just announcing that good work is about to happen.

The good news is that this is a learnable skill. Every element of a strong opening — how you introduce yourself, how you frame the session, how you set expectations, how you get energy moving, how you launch the first activity — can be prepared, practiced, and refined. You do not need years of experience. You need a plan and the confidence to follow it.

This guide walks you through the first 30 minutes in five sections. Each section gives you the why, the how, and the specific language to use. Take what fits your style. Adapt what does not. But use it — because a strong opening changes everything that follows.

SECTION 1

Opening a Session

The First 60 Seconds — What Actually Matters

Forget the idea that you need a perfect opening line. What participants respond to in the first 60 seconds is not what you say — it is how you **show up**. Are you standing? Are you making eye contact? Does your voice carry? Do you seem like someone who is glad to be in the room? Those non-verbal signals land before a single word does.

In the first 60 seconds, participants are asking two unconscious questions: *Is this person credible?* and *Is this person human?* You need to answer yes to both. Credibility comes from presence — being physically or virtually positioned as the leader of the space. Humanity comes from warmth — a genuine smile, an acknowledgment of the room, a moment of real connection before you get into the content.

The mistake most new facilitators make is jumping straight into logistics or content. Resist that instinct. Your first 60 seconds should establish who you are, signal that you oversee the space, and invite the room to settle in. That is it. Everything else follows.

What to Say When You Start (Not a Script — a Structure)

A script will make you sound like a script. Instead, use a **structure** — a clear sequence of moves you can deliver in your own voice. The structure gives you the skeleton; you provide the skin. Here is what the opening structure looks like in practice:

- **Claim the space.** Stand at the front, make eye contact with the group, and pause for one to two seconds before speaking. That pause signals authority.
- **Welcome the group.** A brief, direct welcome. Not overly formal. Not over-the-top enthusiastic. Just genuine.
- **Introduce yourself.** Name, role, and one sentence that tells them why you are the right person to lead this session. Keep it short — they do not need your full biography.
- **Name the session.** Tell them what this is and, crucially, what it is for. The "for" is the hook.
- **Acknowledge the room.** If people have come from different teams, if it is Monday morning, if the room is warm — name it. A moment of shared humanity breaks the ice better than any icebreaker game.
- **Signal the structure.** Give them the shape of the session. People relax when they know what is coming and when it ends.

Common Opening Mistakes

⚠ Warning — Opening Mistakes to Avoid

- **Apologising before you start.** Phrases like "I know this might not be everyone's favourite topic" or "Sorry for keeping you all in here" signal low confidence and undermine the session before it begins.
- **Reading from slides or notes in the first two minutes.** Eye contact is everything in the opening. If your head is down, you have already lost the room.
- **Starting with lengthy housekeeping.** Bathrooms, fire exits, and phone rules can wait two minutes. Lead with purpose first, logistics second.
- **Rushing to fill the silence.** A two-second pause is powerful. Filling every moment with noise makes you seem nervous, not prepared.
- **Over-promising.** "This is going to change the way you work forever" sets an expectation you likely cannot meet. Be honest about what the session will and will not do.

A Strong Opening Structure

Use these six steps in order. You do not need to spend more than 30–45 seconds on each one. Together, they should take no more than four to five minutes.

- **Position yourself physically.** Stand at the front, face the group, and make brief eye contact before you speak. In a virtual session, ensure your camera is on and at eye level.
- **Deliver a direct welcome.** Welcome people by name if the group is small, or as a group if it is larger. Keep it natural and brief.
- **Introduce yourself with purpose.** Share your name and role and add one sentence about why you are leading this session. Your credibility line does not need to be impressive — it just needs to be true.
- **Frame the purpose of the session.** Tell the group what this session is for and what they will walk away with. Focus on the outcome, not the agenda.
- **Give the session shape.** Tell them roughly how the time is structured — how long, how many sections, when breaks are. People engage more willingly when they can see the shape of the journey.
- **Invite them in.** A simple phrase like "Let's get started" or "I'm glad you're all here — let's make this time count" closes the opening and moves you forward.

Opening Energy: How to Walk In Ready

The energy you carry into the room is the energy the room starts with. If you walk in looking distracted, stressed, or uncertain, you have already set a tone — and it is not the one you want. Preparing your energy is just as important as preparing your content.

Before the session starts, give yourself five quiet minutes. Not to review slides — to settle. Take a few slow breaths, stand tall, remind yourself why this session matters. Think about the one or two participants who will really benefit from what you are about to do. That mental reset shifts your energy from *anxious facilitator* to *prepared leader*.

Arrive early enough to arrange the physical space the way you want it, greet a few participants as they arrive, and let the room warm up before you formally open. By the time you call the group to attention, you should feel like you belong there — because you do.

SECTION 2

Setting Expectations

Why Expectations Need to Be Named Out Loud

When expectations are not named, participants fill in the blanks themselves — and they usually fill them in wrong. Some assume they are there to listen passively. Others assume they will be grilled on workplace policies. A few assume the session is a response to something that went wrong. None of these assumptions help you.

Naming expectations out loud — clearly, early, and in plain language — removes ambiguity and creates a shared understanding of how the session will work. It also gives you, the facilitator, something to refer to if the group drifts. Expectations are not just a courtesy at the start of a session. They are a facilitation tool.

What Participants Need to Know Upfront

There are five things participants need to understand before the session can really begin:

- **What the session is about and why it matters.** Not the title — the actual purpose. Why this content, why now, why them.
- **What will be asked of them.** Will they discuss in groups? Reflect individually? Complete activities? Will they be asked to share with the full room? Remove the uncertainty.
- **What confidentiality means in this context.** Especially in a My Workshop Tools™ session, participants need to know how their words and contributions will be treated.
- **What the session is not.** Equally important. If this is not a disciplinary process, say so. If this is not a test, say so. Name the thing people are worried about and put it to rest.
- **What happens next.** Do they get materials? Is there a follow-up? Is this a one-off session or part of something larger? Participants engage more fully when they understand the bigger picture.

Setting Expectations Without Sounding Like a Policy Briefing

There is a version of expectation-setting that sounds like a compliance announcement — stiff, legalistic, and guaranteed to make people switch off. You have heard it: "Please note that participation in this session is tracked and all materials are the property of the organisation." That language kills engagement before it starts.

The goal is to be clear without being cold. Use plain language. Use the word "we" rather than "participants will be expected to." Frame expectations as shared agreements rather than top-down rules. And wherever possible, explain the reason behind the expectation — people follow guidelines more willingly when they understand the purpose.

Think of it this way: you are not reading them their rights. You are letting them in on how this is going to work so everyone can get the most out of the time together. That shift in framing changes the tone entirely.

The Difference Between Rules and Agreements

Rules are handed down. **Agreements** are made together. In a facilitated session, agreements land better — they create shared ownership of the environment, which means participants are more likely to hold each other to them. Even if the agreements are essentially the same as rules, the process of naming them collaboratively changes how people relate to them.

A simple way to shift from rules to agreements: instead of "The rule in this room is no side conversations," try "One thing that really helps sessions like this is everyone being present — can we agree to that as a group?" You get the same outcome, but the room has been invited to own it rather than comply with it.

Sample Expectation-Setting Language

Phrase Bank — Setting Expectations

- *"Before we dive in, I want to set us up for a good session. Here's how I'd like this to work..."*
- *"What's said in this room stays in this room. We can talk about themes and ideas, but we don't carry specific conversations outside of this group."*
- *"This isn't about right or wrong answers. It's about thinking together — and you don't need to have everything figured out to contribute."*
- *"I'm going to ask you to do a few things today that might feel a bit different from a usual training. I'll explain each one before we start, so nothing will catch you off guard."*
- *"Can we agree that everyone gets a fair shot to speak — and that we listen when someone else has the floor? That's the one thing that makes sessions like this really work."*

SECTION 3

Explaining Participation

Telling People How This Session Works

Most participants have been in enough bad workshops to be quietly sceptical when a new one starts. They are not hostile — they are cautious. One of the best things you can do early in a session is demystify the experience: tell them exactly how the session will work, what formats they will encounter, and what will be expected of them at each stage.

When people know what is coming, they can prepare themselves mentally and emotionally. That preparation translates directly into better participation. You are not spoiling the session by explaining it — you are making it accessible.

Why You Need to Explain the "How" — Not Just the "What"

Most facilitators spend time explaining *what* a session is about. Far fewer take the time to explain *how* it works. But for participants, the "how" is what they are worried about. Will I be put on the spot? Will I have to share personal experiences? Will my manager be listening? Will this be timed?

Explaining the "how" — the actual mechanics of participation — addresses those concerns directly. It also sets a standard. If you tell participants that this session uses small group discussion, individual reflection, and whole-group sharing, they know what to expect and can pace themselves accordingly. Ambiguity creates anxiety; clarity creates engagement.

Formats and What They Mean for Participants

Format	What Participants Do	What to Tell Them
Full group discussion	Listen, respond, and contribute to a facilitated conversation with the whole room.	"I'll ask a question to the group. Anyone can respond — there's no pressure to go in order or speak every time."
Small group discussion	Talk through a question or scenario in a group of 3–5 people, then report back.	"You'll have a few minutes to talk in your group. One person will share a summary — but you decide what to share."
Individual reflection	Write or think quietly in response to a prompt before sharing or moving on.	"This is just for you. You won't be asked to hand it in or read it aloud unless you choose to."

Format	What Participants Do	What to Tell Them
Paired conversation	Talk with one other person — often someone they do not regularly work with.	"This stays between you and your partner. It's a chance to think something through with a fresh perspective."
Scenario / case-based activity	Read or discuss a fictional workplace scenario and respond to questions about it.	"We're looking at a situation — not a real one, not yours — and using it to think about how we'd respond."

Making Participation Feel Voluntary — Even When It Isn't Entirely

In many organisational settings, attending a workshop is mandatory — but the depth of engagement is always, to some degree, voluntary. People can sit in a room and be physically present without being mentally or emotionally there. Your goal is to make full participation feel genuinely worth their time — not something they are being compelled to do.

The key is offering low-stakes entry points. Not every participant needs to speak first, or speak loudest, or share the most vulnerable thing in the room. Give people options: they can contribute to a small group, write something down, nod along, or choose when to step into the full group discussion. Build participation gradually, from low-risk to higher-risk, and most people will go further than you expected.

Also: use **"pass" language** early and mean it. Telling participants "if any question doesn't feel right for you to answer right now, it's okay to pass" creates psychological safety — and most people, given that permission, choose not to use it.

Sample Participation Framing

Phrase Bank — Explaining Participation

- *"This session mixes a few different formats — some things you'll do as a group, some in smaller conversations, and a couple of moments just for you to think. I'll walk you through each one as we get there."*
- *"There's no such thing as a wrong answer in this room. We're here to think together, not to get tested."*
- *"If I ask the group a question and you're not ready to answer, that's completely fine — just say 'pass' and we'll move on. No pressure, no follow-up."*
- *"You'll get the most out of today if you lean in — but you get to decide how much to share and when. I'll never put anyone on the spot without warning."*

SECTION 4

Building Energy

Energy Is Contagious — In Both Directions

This is one of the most important things to understand as a facilitator: the energy in the room is not fixed. It moves, it shifts, and — crucially — it follows your lead. If you are flat, the room will be flat. If you are engaged and alive, the room will rise to meet you. That is not pressure — that is opportunity.

Energy does not mean loud or performative. It means **present**. It means you are genuinely interested in what participants have to say. It means you respond to their contributions with real attention, not just a nod and a move-on. Authentic engagement is contagious in a way that manufactured enthusiasm never is.

The Facilitator's Role in Setting the Emotional Tone

You are the emotional weather system of the room. Participants look to the facilitator to calibrate how they should feel about the session — is this safe? Is this interesting? Is it okay to relax? Your tone, pace, posture, and responsiveness all communicate answers to those questions before you say a word about content.

Setting a positive emotional tone does not mean pretending everything is great. It means being warm, being direct, and being genuinely curious about the people in the room. A facilitator who looks like they want to be there creates participants who want to be there too. Start with your own energy — and the room's will follow.

Ice-Breakers vs. Energisers: What's the Difference?

These terms get used interchangeably, but they serve different purposes. An **ice-breaker** is designed to reduce social distance — to help people feel comfortable with each other and with the facilitator before the real work begins. An **energiser** is designed to raise physical and mental alertness — useful after a break, a long stretch of listening, or a slow start.

In the first 30 minutes, you almost always need an ice-breaker — and sometimes an energiser too, depending on the group. Choose your opener based on what the room needs, not just what feels comfortable to facilitate. A group of strangers needs connection. A tired group on a Monday morning needs movement and humour. A group that knows each other well but carries some tension needs a low-stakes reset before the real conversation starts.

4 Practical Openers That Work

1. **Two Truths and a Lie (adapted).** Each participant shares two true things and one false thing about their relationship to the session's topic — for example, their experience with workplace conversations, their background, or their feelings about training. The group guesses the lie. This works because it ties personal disclosure directly to the session content, making it purposeful rather than just entertaining. Keep groups small (4–5 people) and time-box to 5 minutes.
2. **The One-Word Check-In.** Ask each participant to share one word that describes how they are arriving to the session today — not how they feel about the topic, just their current state. Go around the room quickly. This takes under three minutes for most groups, requires no preparation, and gives you a real-time read on the room's energy before you commit to your opening tone.
3. **Scenario Snap Reaction.** Put a brief, low-stakes workplace scenario on screen or on a card and ask participants to write down their first instinct — what they notice, what they would do, or what question it raises for them. Share in pairs. This serves as both an opener and a soft entry into the session's content, making the transition from warm-up to main session seamless.
4. **The Best/Worst Workshop They've Attended.** Ask participants to think of the best or worst training session they have ever attended — and one word that describes it. Share in pairs, then invite two or three responses to the full group. This is disarmingly honest, immediately creates connection, and tells you exactly what you need to avoid — right from the participants themselves.

What to Do If Energy Is Low From the Start

Sometimes the group walks in flat. It is Monday. There was a difficult team meeting before this one. Three people are visibly on their phones. Do not panic — and do not pretend it is not happening. Naming what you see is almost always more effective than ignoring it.

Try something physical: ask people to stand, move to a different part of the room, or find a partner they do not usually work with. Movement shifts mental state faster than almost anything else you can do verbally. If the group is virtual, ask everyone to turn their camera on and type one word in the chat. Even small acts of visible participation break the passive pattern.

If energy remains low, adjust your pace. Slow down slightly, speak a little more warmly, and ask a question that is genuinely easy to answer. Give people a small win early. Energy builds incrementally — your job is to start the chain reaction, not to generate it all yourself.

SECTION 5

Launching the First Activity

The First Activity Sets the Participation Standard

However, participants engage in the first activity is how they will engage for the rest of the session. If the first activity is unclear and people disengage, disengagement becomes the norm. If the first activity is well-run and people lean in, leaning in becomes the expectation. The **first activity is the most important one you will run all day** — not because of its content, but because of what it establishes.

Think of it as a participation contract. When the first activity goes well — when instructions are clear, timing is respected, and contributions are genuinely acknowledged — participants learn that this facilitator knows what they are doing, and that participating is safe and worthwhile. That learning stays with them for the entire session.

Choosing the Right First Activity

The best first activities share three characteristics: they are low-risk, they are directly relevant to the session content, and they guarantee that every participant says or does something within the first 10–15 minutes. Low-risk means the question or task does not require anyone to be vulnerable or expert right away. Relevant means it is not just a warm-up game — it is a genuine entry point into the topic. Universal means no one can opt out completely.

Avoid first activities that require participants to share personal experiences they may not be ready to share, that produce a clear "right answer" (which creates anxiety about being wrong), or that only a few participants can contribute to at once. The first activity should work for everyone in the room, regardless of their level of experience with the topic.

How to Give Activity Instructions Clearly

Confusing instructions are one of the most common and most avoidable facilitation mistakes. Use this five-step sequence every time:

- **State the purpose first.** Before explaining what to do, tell participants why. "The point of this activity is to give you a chance to..." One sentence. This primes them to engage purposefully rather than just following a set of steps.
- **Explain the task in plain language.** What exactly will they do? With whom? For how long? Use short sentences. Avoid jargon. Speak as if you are explaining it to someone who has never been in a workshop before.

- **Handle logistics.** How many people per group? How are groups formed? What materials do they need? Answer these before anyone has to ask.
- **Give the time.** Tell them exactly how long they have. Then write it on the board or screen. People work better when they can see the clock.
- **Check for understanding before you start.** Ask "Does everyone know what they're doing?" or "Any questions before we begin?" — and pause long enough for a real answer. Then launch.

What to Watch For While the First Activity Runs

While the activity is underway, your job is to **observe**, not to administer. Move around the room. Listen in on conversations — not to monitor, but to gather insights you can use when you debrief. Look for participants who seem disengaged or confused and offer a quiet check-in. Look for contributions that are particularly rich — you will want to draw those out when you reconvene.

Keep one eye on the time and give a two-minute warning before the activity ends. This respects the group's work and prevents the jarring feeling of being cut off mid-thought. If a group finishes early, have a follow-up prompt ready: "If you've covered the question, talk about what surprised you in the discussion." Always have a next gear.

How to Debrief the First Activity (and Transition Into the Main Session)

The debrief is where learning is made visible. Without it, an activity is just an activity. With a strong debrief, it becomes the foundation for everything that follows. For the first activity, keep the debrief tight — three to five minutes — and use it to surface two or three insights that connect directly to the session's main content.

Use open questions: "What came up for your group?" or "What surprised you?" rather than "Did anyone find that interesting?" Let two or three participants share before you add your own framing. Then bridge: use a single sentence to connect what they just said to what comes next. Something like: "That's a perfect setup for what we're going to explore in the next section." That bridge is your pivot point from warm-up to main session — and when it lands, the transition feels effortless.

Key Takeaways

- **Claim the space before you speak.** Your physical presence and eye contact establish authority before a word is said — use them intentionally.
- **Use structure, not a script.** A clear opening sequence — welcome, introduction, purpose, shape, invitation — gives you confidence without making you sound rehearsed.
- **Name expectations out loud and early.** Participants engage more willingly when they know exactly what is asked of them, what is off the table, and how the session will work.
- **Frame agreements collaboratively, not as rules.** Inviting the group to own the session norms creates shared accountability that lasts the full day.
- **Explain the "how," not just the "what."** Participants are not worried about the topic — they are worried about what will be asked of them. Address that directly.
- **Build participation gradually.** Start with low-risk, high-accessibility entry points and let confidence and comfort grow from there.
- **Match your opener to what the room needs.** A tired group needs movement; a stranger group needs connection; a tense group needs a reset. Read the room before you choose your warm-up.
- **Give activity instructions in five steps.** Purpose, task, logistics, timing, and a comprehension check — in that order, every time.
- **Debrief the first activity before moving on.** The debrief is where the activity becomes learning — do not skip it, even if you are running short on time.
- **Prepare your energy, not just your content.** How you walk in is how the session begins. Give yourself five minutes before the room fills to settle, ground, and lead.

Quick Reference

The First 30 Minutes

Your First 60 Seconds

- Position yourself at the front and make eye contact before speaking.
- Pause for one to two seconds — let the room settle around you.
- Deliver a direct, genuine welcome (no apologies, no preamble).
- Introduce yourself with name, role, and one credibility sentence.
- Frame the session purpose in a single, clear sentence — the "why us, why now."

Setting Expectations

- "Before we dive in, here's how I'd like this to work..."
- "What's said here stays here — we talk about themes, not people."
- "This isn't a test. There are no wrong answers in this room."
- "If anything doesn't feel right to answer right now, just say ‘pass’."
- "Can we agree that everyone gets a fair shot to speak today?"

Building Energy Fast

- Use a one-word check-in to read the room instantly.
- Ask everyone to physically move — stand, change seats, find a partner.
- Name low energy out loud — the acknowledgment alone shifts it.
- Use paired conversation before full-group sharing to lower the stakes.
- Give the group a small, easy win early — success breeds engagement.

Launching the First Activity

- State the purpose before the instructions — tell them the "why" first.
- Keep instructions short, plain, and free of jargon.
- Give a clear time boundary and display it visibly.
- Observe and listen while the activity runs — do not administer it.
- Always debrief before moving on — the debrief is where learning lives

You have already done the hardest part — showing up ready to lead. The rest is just follow-through.