



Great Ways to Kick off a Soft Skills Workshop

A discussion by and for trainers, drawn from the LinkedIn Training & Development Group's Discussion and edited by Susan Landay, President of [Trainers Warehouse](#)

As a member in the LinkedIn community, I have participated in several group discussions. One discussion that has been particularly active and interesting is the Training and Development Group's discussion about "[The ideal agenda or activities for the first hour in an Essential Skills \(soft skills\) Workshop.](#)"

To date, group members from around the world have posted 114 comments, rich with suggestions, recommendations, exercises, and agendas, plus responses and replies to others' comments. Because the LinkedIn online discussion is posted based on recency of comments, I thought it would be interesting and helpful to synthesize and organize the responses thematically, for easy reference and retrieval.

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Giving credit where credit is due

When suggestions were repeated a couple of times in different ways, the contributors names are withheld. For particularly unique or comprehensive approaches, we reference the contributor's name. In editing this discussion, many comments are excerpted and paraphrased.

Overview & Goals

While specific recommendations always depend on the group, the duration of the session, the course material, and how well participants already know each other, and the level of "risk" expected in the session, which might suggest varying needs to build comfort, the necessary components of a trainers opening are best captured by these two suggestions:

#1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Wil Rickards referenced **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**. The idea is that a person's most basic needs must be satisfied before higher order needs, such as learning, can occur. These needs are:

1. **Physiological:** address students physical needs and comforts – food, warmth, light, hydration, bathroom needs, rest, etc.
2. **Safety** – make participants feel safe to be present, participate, speak, and share, without fear of ridicule.
3. **Belonging** – create a community of learners.
4. **Esteem** – help everyone to feel valued.

#2: The Basic Agenda

To satisfy participants needs, many trainers try to cover these topics:

1. Very warm Welcome. (flip charting their requirements for the day)
2. Quick housekeeping (let people know when they will break for food; where the bathrooms are; and conduct an "adult conversation about mobiles!")
3. Introduction (flip charting their requirements for the day)
4. My credibility
5. Whats in it for you / your company
6. Exercise (usually in groups, definitely standing up!)

More Goals

Following is a list of the goals trainers cited, when discussing the types of questions and activities they like. It expands nicely upon Maslow's Hierarchy. Openings should:

- Be fun & Interesting
- Allow participants to learn something new about one another
- Allow participants to get comfortable, loosen up
- Identify participants motivation and goals
- Get people thinking and verbalizing their reason for being there;
- Break the ice and engender trust
- Get everyone engaged early and set the tone for full participation
- Raise energy of the group

- Give attendees a sense of control and participation
- Help attendees feel connected
- Treat attendees as “guests”

Before the Meeting Starts

Several commented on the ways the prime participants for learning before the formal training event begins.

- Be in the class well in advance and greet every participant as they enter the classroom and have small talk with them—this sets the tone and relaxes you and them.
- Play a soft music to aid relaxation.
- Play some upbeat rock’n’roll music – anything from “oldies” like the Beatles, blues/rock like Johnny Lang or Kenny Wayne Sheppard, or more modern like Dave Matthews. “There's enough music on my computer where I can take requests. Sometimes I’ll appoint a ‘music director’ who chooses the music for the group for that day.” [George Ferguson](#)
- Send them questions and an outline to think about beforehand, so they have some idea of how the program will work.
- Send a message about humor or timeliness by announcing a 7:58 or 9:17 a.m. start time.
- Post posters/signs in the hallway area leading to the room with images and info about the event, like at a movie theatre complex .
- Show a 3-minute Simple Truths' movie. There are a variety of subjects from Leadership, Teamwork, Going the Extra Mile, etc. To watch any of the movies, click on www.simpletruths.com/movies [Michele Lofchie](#)
- Have each person’s name on a vibrant PowerPoint slide (i.e. "Welcome to... Susie Eastwood") and set the slideshow to "revolve until escape" in the settings, revealing the names of each participant, one at a time until you are ready to start. This is easy to do, memorable, and loved by all! [Jason Stevens](#)
- Like in movie theaters, show a PowerPoint presentation containing quiz questions about company trivia or motivational sayings, interspersed with course information. [Leslie Orr](#)
- Introduce a “Parking Lot.” If ideas come up, but take away from the task or topic, tell the group you’ll write them down on a sticky note, place them on the "parking lot" board. Then you can address these ideas when appropriate or at the end of the workshop or meeting. [Sylvia Maisano](#)
- Doodle on the board as participants arrive and ask them to guess what it is. The activity melts the ice and sets a tone of “no right or wrong answers” [Imran Syed](#)

Probing Questions

Many trainers like to start with a stimulating question to break the ice, foster introductions, help participants get to know each other, and reduce tension.

Questions about you

- Tell us something your colleagues do not know about you.
- Who has been your best coach in their past and why?
- What would you do if you won the lottery? (I often offer my answer first to engender trust. I learn what motivates each person as well. Where they know each other, and I do not know them)
- "What was a dream you had as a child?" (great for a visioning/goal setting workshop).
- Share a memorable moment of your life.
- What was your favorite hobby or pastime as a child?
- Introduce yourself simply with your name and an adjective that describes you. The adjective must start with the same letter as your first name!
- When you introduce yourself, tell us the best part of their job, the most difficult part of their job (if there is one), and what topic they are interested in learning more about after reviewing the table of contents.
- What does family mean to you?
- What are you most proud of in your life?
- What's your claim to fame?

Questions about workshop goals

- Tell me why you are here (even if it's because your boss told you to) and what your objectives are. I write it down on an easel pad and post it for the day, and review with the group as we go.
 - Have small groups work on one of these questions:
 - What are your biggest challenges related to _____ in 2011?
 - What are the key things you wish to do better related to _____?
 - What drives you crazy related to _____?
 - Using Peter Block's "Four Powerful Questions" (*Flawless Consulting Skills*, 2nd Edition, pages 283-286) ask: "On a scale of 1-7, with 7 as high answer,
 1. How valuable do you plan this workshop to be?
 2. How participative do you plan to be?
 3. How much risk do you plan to take?
 4. To what extent do you plan to be invested in the learning and well being of the whole group?
- NOTE: ask about *their plans* (action word) and NOT their expectations (a prediction), to shift accountability and ownership to everyone present.
- Ask this TRIO of questions:
 1. What specifically do you want to take away from this workshop?
 2. How will you achieve this?

3. How will you know when you have achieved this?
Finally, imagine yourself applying the new behaviours in the workplace.

Sharing and debriefing participant objectives

Have participants go through the objectives they have identified as a group and pick their top 2 or 3. Then ask for a show of hands on how many choose each objective. Explain to the group that you will use this as a tool to tailor the content to the class, focusing more time and energy on the objectives people really want.

Favorite Intro Exercises

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

For Train the Trainer workshops, I use the following technique to kinesthetically introduce Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I mark out a triangle on the floor and then slot people into "the hierarchy" giving each stage a diagram of the model. (<http://www.businessballs.com/maslowhierarchyofneeds8.pdf> is my favorite).

Ask each "stage" to explain what they represent and why they are situated below the stage above them.

This exercise fulfills several functions - 1. it teaches the model, 2. it gets participants to be close together preparing for other team building exercises later, 3. it sends out a clear message about why you are teaching the way you are - you walk your talk, 4. you set up clear expectations of behaviors without having to lecture.

If you really want to spice it up with athletes or PE teachers - see if you can build a human pyramid - this really gets across the point that the base needs to be strong before you move onto the next stage and that self actualization can be pretty fleeting. [Wil Rickards](#)

Group Mingle

After a very brief kickoff I almost always do a **group mingle**.

Words Music Dance – A First Impressions Exercise

1. Overview - Spend a few minutes talking about alignment of "words, music, and dance" (what you say, how you say it, your body language). You might use a flipchart or a slide or a handout so people can both READ and HEAR the point you are making.
2. Demonstration - Show how misalignment diminishes the power of your words (e.g., say "I'm a very confident person while hunching over and looking at the floor). Then relate the idea of alignment in words/music/dance to the rest of the workshop (and very important, keep coming back to this later).

3. Preliminary set-up - Before anybody arrives, write the name of each participant on an envelope and tape them in alphabetical order along a wall. If you have 20 participants, make 20 piles each with 20 index cards (10 people = 10 cards each, etc). Put these piles at each participant chair/desk.
4. Introduce Words/Music/Dance Activity - Explain the following
 - Purpose: 1) Introduce each other. 2) Get feedback on the first impressions we make through our words/music/dance
 - Process: Each person introduces him/herself (no more than 2 minutes). Everyone else listens and jots down a few observations of what they heard or saw. If you have a co-facilitator, it is VERY helpful at this point to demonstrate: One person gives a short intro and the other takes some notes on a card. Use a flipchart or slide to illustrate what the card says - make sure there are some neutral, some positive, and some negative observations, and make sure the name of the speaker and the name of the writer are on the card. For example: To Sam, from Leslie "Stood erect, energetic, professional, funny, talked too fast"
 - Participation: Every participant takes part in this as both speaker and observer/feedback-giver. The facilitator manages the process and the time. If you have a co-facilitator, he/she should go LAST in the intros. Ask for a volunteer to start off "Who would like to speak?" Make this go quickly - don't allow more than 15-30 seconds for notes after each speaker because this is feedback on first impressions.
 - Product: After all the introductions, each person will have a stack of index cards with notes. After the intros are all done, each person will place the feedback for every other person in the envelopes on the wall (easier if they alphabetize the cards first). I usually take a short break at this point to re-set the energy. **DO NOT ALLOW PARTICIPANTS TO GET THE CARDS** at this point, or you will totally lose their attention! Make sure to tell people when they will get the cards.
5. Debrief - After the exercise (and break if you take one), review the agenda, the rest of the objectives, etc. Be sure to explain how the feedback they receive from the first impressions exercise relates to the rest of the workshop. At the appropriate time, encourage participants to seek further feedback or clarification on the behavioral observations on their cards. You can also do a group debrief of this exercise, but focus on the process (what happened, what did you learn, how can this be applied?) rather than the specific behavioral feedback. Finally, take care to emphasize in the set-up that the feedback should be based on observed behavior (what was seen or heard) not guesses about intent or inferences about personality. It is so rare to receive feedback on how we are perceived, that I find most participants are grateful for the insights. [Leslie \(Ehrmann\) Goldenberg](#)

First Impressions

I often start a soft skills session by asking the delegates to introduce me. I ask them to tell me, for example, how old I am, whether or not I am married, the level of formal education I reached (if any), where I live, what kind of house I live in, what kind of car I have, where I take my holidays - anything that they believe could be true of me which I haven't told them.

Other discussion contributors offered a First Impressions exercise (less structured than Words Music Dance) in which participants, identify and share their first impressions with other delegates by answering the questions like those identified below (*Kenneth Hawkins & Associates was credited with this list*):

- What did you notice first about this person?
- What part of the country or world is this person from?
- What language(s) does the person speak?
- What type of educational background do you believe this person has?
- What is this person's profession or what does this person do for a living?
- Does the person have a religious affiliation, if yes describe?
- What is this person's political affiliation?
- What is this person's living situation? (married, single, divorced, children, etc.)
- What type of mate would you expect this person to have?
- In which kinds of social events or activities would you expect to find this person?
- It would surprise you if the person were interested in _____ activity or hobby.
- Which types of music would this person enjoy and not enjoy?
- Does this person own a car? If yes, what type?
- How would you expect this person to react in a conflict situation?
- On a serious – fun spectrum, how would you describe this person?
- Does the person seem like someone with whom you would easily relate?

While some of these suggestions may seem a bit risky, you may pick and choose those with which you are most comfortable, in order to discuss **assumptions** and how misleading our **first impressions** can be.

To reinforce the point, I'll ask the delegates how many have met someone they liked at first and grew to dislike or vice versa. They all admit they have done both. Indeed, first impressions can be very wrong and yet our first impressions - our perceptions of someone - become our reality and we will relate to the person as though those impressions are true. And we can get that horribly wrong.

Debrief – Explain that the foundations of much soft skills training are about really getting to know people - to understand as much as we can without judgement, assumptions or preconceptions. That's what the rest of the day is about. [David Cotton](#)

'Two truths & a Lie'.

Audience has a 3X5 card which they write down their name, two truths and one lie about themselves. Cards are exchanged and then cards read out loud where audience tries to guess the lie.

Variation:

- Break participants into groups of 4 and give each group a flipchart page. The rules are simple: they can't use words or numbers, they can't share their lie with their teammates, and they must draw their truths and lie as pictures.
- I start out by my drawings (done very poorly, of course!) to show that it's not about artistry.

- I give the group about 20 minutes to complete all four individuals' drawings. Then they go around and introduce themselves and tell us their three "facts."
- Once everyone has introduced themselves, we walk around the class and put a checkmark beside the one drawing per person that we believe to be the lie.
- When all have checked their choice, we reintroduce ourselves and point out the lie.
- By the time this is over, we are all laughing at our drawings and at the shared truths and lies. It's a good start to a good workshop experience.

Stand up. Sit Down

Here's how it works: the facilitator says a phrase and those for whom the statement is true stand up, those for whom it is false sit down (i.e. "I have a pet." or "This is my first training session." or "I hate touchy-feely training games" or "I best like to work on my own rather in teams."). After each phrase, you can invite those standing to sit back down again -- or if they are incremental topics, you can say "stay standing if ..."

Start with not-too-personal subjects and subjects that will likely cause a lot of people to stand, then move on to more sensitive areas once folks get more comfortable.

Thumball

I use an icebreaker tool called a Thumball. It has various questions on it like "what's your favorite board game", "where is the best place to live", etc. The students throw it around the class and have fun answering the fun question on the ball. I then give them a second question specifically related to why they choose to attend the class or what they hope to get out of the class. [Bobby Brooks](#)

Imagining Success

To get people in the mindset to share ownership over making the learning event successful, I often do an 'appreciative' exercise.

Divide participants into groups of three or four and ask them to think about a peak experience of whatever the topic is (e.g. the best meeting you ever attended - or if that's too hard, how about a reasonably successful meeting in the last month? / the most interesting presentation you remember / the most successful piece of writing you've done etc.).

Ask them to think about what made this so successful.

Get them to share the experience with the other members of the group and the group to come up with some of the elements of success.

Collect these "Elements of Success" on the flip chart. This exercise engages everyone and encourages positive attitudes. [Melissa Biro](#)

Speed Intros

I do a meet and greet version of speed dating. Have people pair up with someone they don't know, then find a non-work or non-workshop connection with the person. 30 seconds per individual, 1 minute per pair. 3-5 minutes overall (meet 3-4 people). If people in the room know each other well, then they should find out something about that person they didn't know before.

Find your Match

What has worked for me is to give each participant a slip of paper with information on it that is relevant to the topic or participants in general. They have to find the corresponding participant with the same information, introduce themselves, and talk briefly about what the information means to them.

Thiagi's HELLO exercise

Hello is an opener that directly relates to the workshop process and content. It uses a deck of playing cards and a few other items.

The basic idea is that you prepare four questions related to individuals' expectations, experience, questions and changes regarding the training.

Teams of players are charged with the task of collecting responses from everyone in the room in just a few minutes time. The exercise is high energy and lets participants meet one another, while remaining focused on the day's agenda. The exercise is described in full on Thiagi's website: thiagi@thiagi.com.

A Picture and a Few Words

I have a great collection of picture post cards, many of which have been sent to me by art galleries to advertising an opening and some that are recycled greeting/note cards. I've got about 100 now.

I spread them out on a table at the back of the room and having opened the workshop, intro'd topic, myself, given a roadmap for how the session will run, I invite them to go back and choose a card that represents "Where you struggle most when presenting your ideas to others/getting ideas from your team/engaging with hotel guests"... whatever the overriding subject of the workshop is.

I then go around the room and ask each person share their name and a brief description of their role (for my benefit, if they all work together) and tell us, in a couple of sentences, why they chose the card they did. I will take the card and move it round the group (almost always seated in a large U shape for my workshops) so that everyone can look at it while the speaker is sharing. I might echo their reasons or get clarification if I need it as I stick it up on the wall.

Once I have them all up there, I sometimes will facilitate a grouping of the cards, so that **WE CAN** identify 4 or 5 common issues around the workshop subject.

The process has many benefits: 1. Needs assessment 2. Sharing of common challenges 3. Ability to share 'through' the picture choice, which allows for less personal exposure -- not saying 'I'm not good at xxx' but rather 'I chose this card because it represents times when I xxx' 4. Good storytelling tool... curiosity level of group is high when they see what cards others have chosen. 5. Allows me to observe how comfortable they are with public speaking and what sort of audience members they are when others are sharing 6. Facilitating the grouping of challenges helps the group to identify commonalities and helps us all identify what we need to work on during the session. Teresa Norton

Name Tents

We provide a name tent that is a full 8 1/2 x 11 paper. We ask attendees to introduce themselves in pictures. I might say "if you were going to tell us about yourself, draw what you would like us to know (family, hobbies, sports teams, favorite stores/brands, school, etc...)."

When they finish their pictures they explain what everything means to the participant next to them. The pairs then introduce the rest of the class to their new "friend." Really helps to open them up on a first day in training with strangers. Krishna Clay

Picture Cards

I love using activities that get participants talking in metaphors to introduce a topic. So I would use a set of picture cards (like Interpre Cards) and ask everyone to find a card that describes a challenge of the topic we are talking about.

When I have them share their card I ask them to introduce themselves. This typically creates a great agenda and assesses your participants' opinions rather quickly. For larger groups I have groups share at their table and then do a summary to the larger group. I have tons of variations of activities like this I use not only at the beginning of a program but throughout it as well.

Dealing with Cell Phones

Cell phones can be a challenge for every teacher and trainer these days. Here are some suggestions and anecdotes to set expectations in mature, respectful, or funny ways.

- Set some **ground rules** in order to:
 1. Set expectations for classroom behavior, respect, and courtesy INCLUDING CELL PHONE USE!
 2. Communicate required information (like safety exits and evacuation procedures)
 3. Make the participant more comfortable and prepared to be attentive (bathrooms, break times, lunch, etc).
- For a small fee you can buy a mobile phone signal jammer which will block signals for a small area around the training room. Here's one:

- I like the idea of a temp / receptionist taking the messages, if this is feasible. Pre-mobile phones, I worked in a sprawling office where all senior staff had beepers they were supposed to carry. A few were very good at giving them to their secretaries, prior to a meeting, and asking them to respond if necessary, with instructions as to what was urgent enough for them to be disturbed - same principle.
- If a phone does ring, I generally say nothing - I ensure that there is quiet in the room and simply stare impassively at the offender. Everyone turns to focus on that one person and they tend not to do it a second time. As you say, Sue, it's just plain rude!
- I train sales people and telesales people, For them the phone/mobile is their entire source of income! I have to be sensitive to this. Over the last 100 or so workshops I have trained adults, and so I have an adult conversation about it.

At the end of the day, if not picking up the phone means they miss an important sale I'm not sure how happy the client would be about that. So I reassure that that I understand life goes on beyond the training room and if they need to make a call to reply on the breaks if possible or let me know up front if they have meetings and conference calls booked in the time span.

This seems to really work for two reasons, 1) banning things puts people offside and 2) if people do start disappearing then I know my content isn't engaging or giving enough value! there is a problem with the translator I am working with!

Other

These few other tips were great suggestions for the first hour of a session. So, they may be last, but they are certainly not least!

- If I make them all laugh or at least **smile** in the first ten minutes of the training, I know that I got them on the right track.
- Tell a **good story**, to introduce yourself, break the ice, and let them know why you're there.
- I might start with a **role-play**, start with a question and get the group into small teams to discuss, or some other interactive process that gets the participants thinking about the learning and helps create a good learning environment.