Facilitation for when feelings run high

Next week I will facilitate one of the most challenging encounters that our company deals with. We have been brought in part way through a process for a new Busway. It has been contentious and complex from the start, with understandable strong feelings on all sides — the public, contractors, politicians, local authority officials, interest groups, expert witnesses and so on. Part of our job is to lower the ‘temperature’ enough to be able to have constructive conversations together - not easy if there is little trust to work with in the first place. But by not having the conversations, everybody loses out. The temptation is to choose the path of least conflict and resistance, bounce decisions through and hope others come on board. This simply breeds distrust, and stores up trouble for later.

Equally in the training room, people sometimes say contentious things, that are perhaps borderline hurtful or prejudiced. I do not collude with bad behaviour or allow people to get away with saying things that are upsetting to others. But the temptation is always to close it down too quickly in some way, hoping it wasn’t taken or meant in the way it might have sounded. Any place where people are talking openly together can be a learning environment, and so long as there is a simple framework around it, the talker should be invited to say more about what he/she means, and for others to hold back. Simply by being able to express themselves is in itself part of a healthy process. Usually people ‘row back’ from the initial absoluteness of what they have said, because they have heard themselves say something aloud which they recognise is perhaps a bit strong, unrealistic or whatever.

The challenge at this stage is for everyone to hold back from piling into a point-scoring exercise. This takes courage on the part of one person (usually the chair/facilitator) to ask them to say a bit more about what they have said. This is counter-intuitive, but is worthwhile. The talker then says more, and as they speak will achieve some kind of internal recognition about what they are saying, except of course the most brazen, or resolute, or closed-minded. At least then everyone knows what they are dealing with, and if it is wrong or racist or hurtful, it is arguably healthier to be said out loud than behind backs. Usually there is then an opportunity to develop constructive conversations one-to-one.