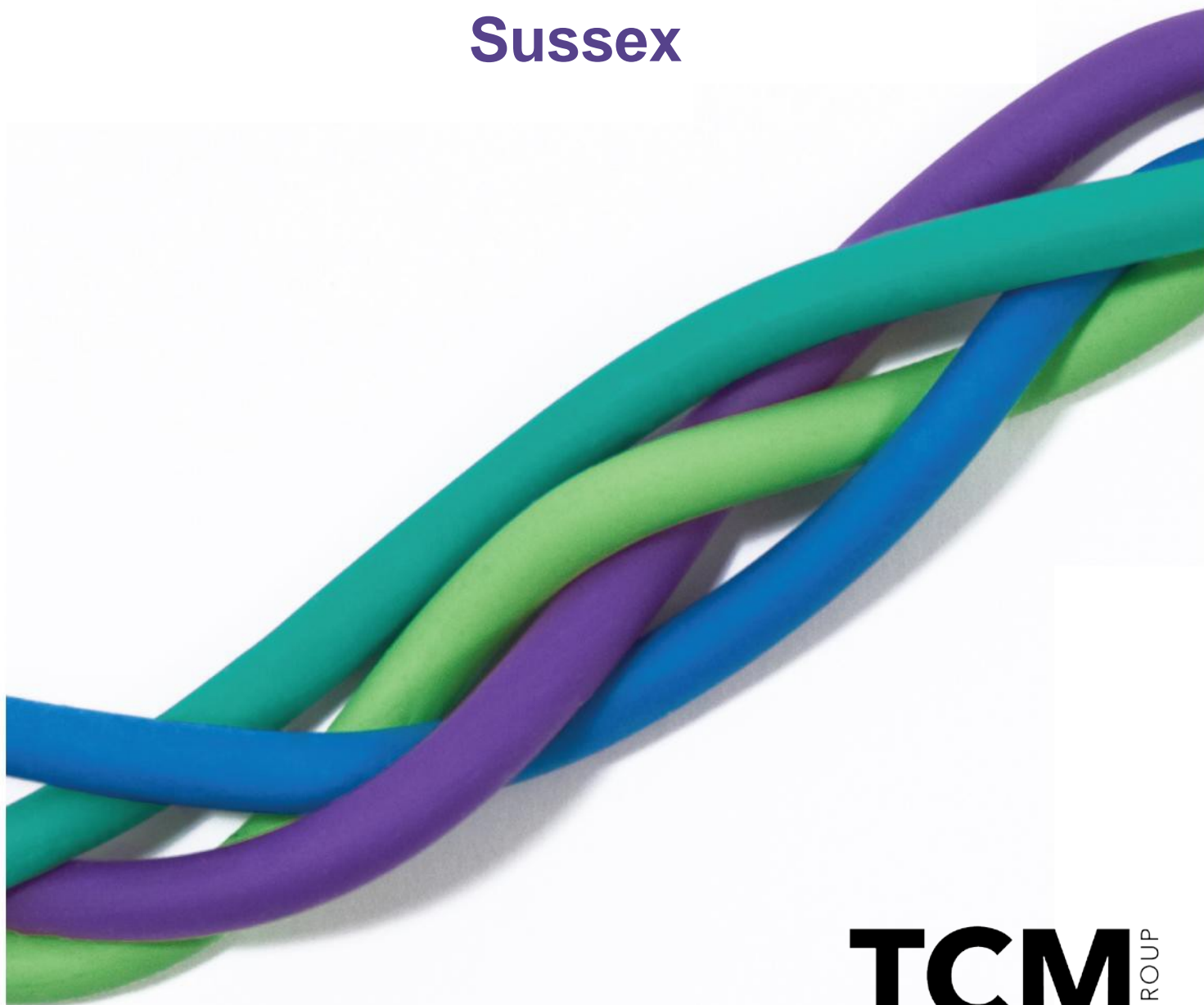


# Confident Conversations™ across Kent, Surrey and Sussex



## The Background

NHS Trusts have been making great strides to improve how employees deal with difficult conversations in the light of the Berwick, Keogh and Francis reports and the Francis follow-up report on whistleblowing, Freedom to Speak Up. In 2013, a staff survey found that 72% of staff felt confident to raise a concern, suggesting there was still a need for training and development in this area.

The Kent, Surrey and Sussex Leadership Collaborative is an authorised leadership delivery partner to the NHS Leadership Academy and operates as the leadership directorate of Health Education England working across Kent, Surrey, Sussex (HEE KSS), commissioning leadership development for NHS organisations within Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

The subject of difficult conversations was further explored at the HEE KSS Sound of the Student and Trainee Voice, an event which ensures the voices of the region's learners and educators from health and social care, allied professionals, support staff and employing organisations, are heard. Participants were asked what the blockers to them using their voice were, identifying a number of reasons including confidence, fear and apathy as to why they might not use their voice.

The KSS Leadership Collaborative commissioned mediation experts The TCM Group to work in collaboration with NHS organisations in the KSS region and develop a one-day workshop called Confident Conversations™, designed specifically for NHS staff to help them identify and respond to issues that are raised, and foster a culture of open communication.

Through a pre-course questionnaire, participants suggested some of the areas they would like the workshop to address, such as:

- “helping me feel more confident in having difficult conversations with staff, medical colleagues and even senior management.”
- “learning tools and techniques which will aid me when faced with difficult situations and when experiencing conflict to ensure the desired outcome is achieved.”
- Tips in planning how to have a challenging conversation, allowing all parties to leave with dignity, but aims and objectives to be delivered.”



## The Solution

The reception for Confident Conversations™ was overwhelmingly positive. Following an initial pilot, seven open workshops were held and in total, over 200 NHS staff from across the KSS region attended the Confident Conversations™ workshops.

Two expert facilitators from The TCM Group hosted the workshop, providing participants with tools and strategies to manage difficult conversations and negotiate outcomes that would be best for everyone.

Role-plays formed a part of the day, with participants experiencing the point of view of patients, staff, and observers. There were also scenario-based discussions, tailored to the types of situations this particular workforce might face – these scenarios were a reflection of real workplace situations based on the responses to the pre-course questionnaire.

Participants were encouraged to practice ‘active listening’: a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. One of the core techniques in managing difficult conversations is to summarise – as this demonstrates whether someone has really been listening and has understood what the other party has to say. Participants experienced using silence in an emotionally charged situation and the positive effect this could have on managing an emotionally charged situation.

At the end of the workshop, everyone who had attended was provided with a toolkit outlining the various theories they had learnt, with helpful tips on how to manage difficult conversations in the future. This toolkit has been shared with the wider NHS workforce and can be viewed on the KSS Leadership Collaborative’s [website](#).

## The Results

Feedback 24 hours after the workshop showed that the majority of attendees felt they had an increase in knowledge of active listening, managing strong emotions and summarising what people had to say.

Three months after the workshops, a further feedback questionnaire was carried out to see how delegates were using the learning and whether it had been retained. Almost half (49%) said that the course had made either a significant impact or very significant impact in the workplace. One participant shared in their questionnaire how a member of her team had become defensive following changes in their work. She was able to utilise tools



practised on the workshop, such as listening and summarising to help engage her team member in coming up with solutions to support their shared work.

Other participants reported that Confident Conversations™ had left them feeling more comfortable handling difficult discussions and more confident in situations such as interviews or appraisals. The following feedback shows just how the learning is being applied:

*"I have certainly applied the learning. I'm more aware of how much even a small conversation with colleagues or patients makes a difference."*

*I can be on-call outside usual working hours and it can feel like everyone wants a piece of you at the same time. Patient issues can become more difficult, there are fewer staff and the situation becomes quite stressful.*

*I've more awareness now of how to prioritise and how to prevent something escalating. I'm more patient, I take a pause before I act and I'm more aware of what I'm saying. It's been very positive."*

A CT3 Psychiatry Trainee from a mental health trust.

*"Before I attended the course I knew there were certain difficult conversations I had to have and feel that I was doing them right. My usual style is straight to the point and I wanted to soften that. I learnt early on in the day that there was no easy way around saying what I had to say, that it was important to come straight out with what I had to say, but explain that it was difficult."*

*I think I will gain more confidence in using the techniques the more I use them. If I don't have these conversations, issues don't get dealt with and it can get messy.*

*I have to have difficult conversations all the time, both with colleagues and patients. Sometimes you have to tell patients something they don't want to hear, or that they're not entitled to a particular service, so the course will help me handle this."*

A Clinical Lead Nurse from a community setting.



*"I hoped to gain confidence in delivering my thoughts, ideas and opinions in a big and diverse crowd during lab meetings, managers' meetings, small group meetings and presentations. I also wanted to learn how to deal with difficult people, whether colleagues, family members or friends due to some issues experienced with decision making.*

*I found the listening part of the course helped me determine where misunderstandings come from. It made me realise that if the person involved feels they are being heard, understood and acknowledged, that makes them feel important too.*

*I have used the learning on various occasions and found it difficult to put into practice at first. I now realise it takes time and experience to get it better and perfect it! An example of a difficult conversation was during the appraisal of one of my colleagues, who revealed that she felt bullied by one of our colleagues. As it is a very delicate matter, I have to be very attentive (and empathetic) and listen carefully. The situation was a perfect example as most of the elements of the course are applicable in dealing with the situation."*

A Senior Biomedical Scientist from an Acute Hospital.

We believe the concepts behind Confident Conversations™ can be used more widely in the NHS and hope that this honest and open approach, based on active listening can be shared as a model. These workshops have provided staff with the confidence and tools to mediate difficult situations themselves resulting in a more positive resolution.

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