

The Challenge Day

Experiential Learning across the Blackpool Transport Network
Blackpool Transport Services | Senior Management Team | 2023

About This Case Study

This case study describes a full-day experiential learning event designed and facilitated by The Clear Thinking Partnership for the senior management team at Blackpool Transport Services. The Challenge Day took place across the live Blackpool Transport network in 2023, engaging managers from across the organisation in a structured challenge that was equal parts competitive, purposeful, and genuinely revelatory.

The day was the culmination of a sustained period of management development work led by The Clear Thinking Partnership at both Starr Gate and Rigby Road depots. Having worked alongside managers in their live environments over an extended coaching programme, the Clear Thinking team understood the people, the operation, and the culture well enough to design a challenge that would stretch participants in exactly the right ways.

The Concept

The Challenge Day was built on a simple but powerful idea: that the best way to understand your operation, and the people who depend on it, is to experience it directly.

Rather than sitting in a conference room reviewing data or listening to presentations, managers were sent out into the network itself, travelling as passengers, speaking to staff, visiting depots, and talking to members of the public. They did all of this as a team, competing for points, operating within a budget, and held to account by a set of rules and values they had spent the previous months learning to live by.

The result was a day that generated real intelligence about the customer experience, the staff experience, and the health of the operation, intelligence that the Directors and Clear Thinking then reviewed together the following day to shape strategic priorities. Crucially, it was also designed to be fun. The competitive element, the scoring, and the carefully structured team activities were all designed to ensure that participants were energised and engaged. Experiential learning works when people are genuinely in it.

The Teams

Three teams competed across the day, each made up of senior staff drawn from across the business:

Team Tower | Engineering, Organisational Development, Tram Operations

Team Pier | Heritage, Health, Safety & Environment, Organisational Development

Team Beach | Marketing, Health, Safety & Environment, Bus Operations

Teams were supported throughout the day by Bev Holden and Carmel Culshaw of The Clear Thinking Partnership, with Event Leaders Jane Cole and James Clough providing additional coordination, including a dedicated WhatsApp channel through which teams could communicate, submit evidence, and, inevitably, engage in a certain amount of good-natured rivalry.

The Objectives

The Challenge Day had eight formal objectives, agreed in advance and shared with every team. At their heart, the day was designed to deepen managers' understanding of the customer and staff experience, strengthen working relationships across departments and depots, and connect the work of the day to Blackpool Transport's values and strategic priorities. Teams were expected to take genuine responsibility for the quality of their engagement, to work within a defined budget and timeframe, and, just as importantly, to experiment, have fun, and bring energy to the challenge.

"Tap into what you know and what you have learned and use it well during the course of the Challenge Day. Take responsibility, lead effectively, collaborate well, share best practice, wins and learns."

The Activities

Each team was required to complete a structured set of activities connected to Blackpool Transport's five Key Strategies: Asset Modernisation, Customer Focus, Health, Safety and Environment, Heritage, and Organisational Development. Activities took teams across the full network, by bus and tram, on foot and in conversation, engaging with passengers, frontline staff, depot teams, and the engineering function. Teams also completed a scavenger hunt across the Fylde Coast and a series of team photography challenges at culturally significant locations.

Points were awarded for each completed activity, with bonus points available for outstanding evidence, exceptional performance, and specific additional challenges. The scoring system was designed to reward both thoroughness and quality of engagement.

The Intelligence Gathered

What the Challenge Day produced, beyond the competition, the teamwork, and the fun, was a substantial body of live intelligence about the Blackpool Transport operation, gathered directly and simultaneously from multiple points across the network. Each team submitted completed observation reports from every activity, covering everything from vehicle condition and driver performance to depot culture, cross-departmental relationships, and structured passenger feedback gathered face to face.

What emerged was consistent and telling. Customers were genuinely positive about the professionalism and attitude of frontline teams, particularly drivers and conductors, and there was real pride in the quality of service being delivered. At the same time, teams identified small but important friction points that operational data alone would not easily surface. Staff conversations were honest and open, about the pressures of day-to-day operations, communication between departments, and the realities of introducing new technology and vehicles into a live network. The engineering feedback was especially valuable, capturing both excitement and concern around the transition to electric vehicles and the Tramway Extension.

"Perhaps the biggest surprise was how much insight was gathered in such a short period of time. Because the managers were physically out in the network, travelling as passengers and engaging people directly, the quality and depth of the intelligence was significantly richer than a traditional survey or meeting-based review."

What Happened Next

The day's completed reports were collected at the end of the event and reviewed the following day by the Directors of Blackpool Transport Services and the Clear Thinking Partnership team. This debrief session was a deliberate part of the design: the intelligence gathered was not filed away but actively used, examined for themes, cross-referenced with strategic priorities, and translated into a conversation about what needed to happen next. The Clear Thinking Partnership confirmed that further questions might be directed back to individual team members to clarify specific details from their reports, a commitment to follow-through that gave the day a genuine legacy rather than simply a memorable event.

The MD's Perspective

We asked Jane Cole, Managing Director of Blackpool Transport Services at the time, to reflect on what the Challenge Day delivered.

On the review of findings

The consistency of themes emerging from completely different parts of the network was striking. The day produced evidence that Directors could use with confidence, evidence drawn directly from live operational observations and real conversations, rather than from surveys or meeting-room discussion. It gave a clearer picture of where the business was performing strongly and where relatively small changes could have a meaningful impact on both staff experience and customer perception.

On how the intelligence translated into action

Findings fed directly into operational and management discussions in the weeks that followed. Some actions were immediate and practical; others supported wider strategic conversations, particularly around cross-departmental communication and engagement during periods of change. The day highlighted the importance of ensuring that operational teams not only understand strategic projects, they feel genuinely involved in them.

On what changed in the managers themselves

One of the clearest outcomes was the way the day broke down barriers between departments and operational areas. Managers who would not normally spend significant time together were required to collaborate closely, solve problems together, and make decisions under pressure in a live operational environment. That created stronger relationships and a greater appreciation of the challenges faced by colleagues across the business.

The day also shifted perspectives. Experiencing the network as customers do, waiting at stops, making connections, observing interactions from the passenger viewpoint, gave managers a different understanding of the small moments that shape customer perception. Many came away with a renewed sense of responsibility for the overall experience, rather than simply their own operational area. There was also a noticeable increase in confidence and ownership: the competitive and experiential nature of the event encouraged people to step outside their normal routines, and reflection afterwards showed that many had learned as much about their own leadership as they had about the operation.

What she would say to another MD

"There is significant value in getting managers out of meeting rooms and back into the live operation with a clear purpose. The intelligence gathered in a single day was exceptionally powerful because it came directly from real interactions with passengers and staff across the network. Just as importantly, the process created energy, accountability, and shared ownership amongst the management team. It was practical, insightful, and genuinely memorable – and it produced outcomes that extended well beyond the day itself."

Why This Matters for a Bus or Tram Operator

When did your managers last experience your operation as your passengers do? And when did you last receive this volume of structured, human, ground-level intelligence about your network, your staff, and your customer relationships, gathered in a single day by the very people who lead the operation?

The Challenge Day is designed from the inside out. Its power comes from the fact that it is built around the specific network, the specific values, and the specific strategic priorities of the organisation it serves. The Clear Thinking Partnership draws on deep knowledge of the business, knowledge that comes from working within it, not simply visiting it.

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