

Rigby Road

Management Coaching Programme

Blackpool Transport Services | Bus Operations | 2022–23

About this case study

This case study describes a management coaching programme designed and delivered by The Clear Thinking Partnership for Service Managers and Assistant Service Managers in Bus Operations at Rigby Road, Blackpool Transport's main bus depot. Commissioned as part of a company-wide investment in people development, the programme ran across two waves: Wave 1 in late 2022 and Wave 2 in early 2023.

What distinguished this programme from conventional management training was the presence of an embedded Clear Thinking team member within the live operational environment. Rather than working only in scheduled sessions, our coach was present in the depot itself, on the ground, alongside managers, observing the real dynamics of a busy bus operation. This meant the coaching was never generic. It was shaped by what was actually happening, informed by the real relationships between managers and drivers, and sensitive to the pressures that came with running a major urban transport network.

The starting point

Bus operations at Rigby Road were facing a set of interconnected challenges at the time the programme began. There was a recognised need to raise professional standards across the management team: in the language used in the depot, in the quality of manager-driver interactions, and in the consistency with which expectations were set and upheld.

At Rigby Road Service Delivery Centre, a glass screen separated the management office from the drivers who depended on the support of the people behind it. The physical environment of the Market Street site created a physical and psychological barrier between managers and staff.

Cross-depot communication between Rigby Road and Starr Gate was also an area for development, with managers across the two sites having limited opportunity to learn from each other or build relationships. The aspiration was a management culture grounded in genuine respect for drivers, consistent professional standards, and a shared sense of pride in the Blackpool Transport brand.

The programme

The coaching programme was structured around six modules, delivered individually and in group sessions across two waves:

- Module 1 | Setting the Scene: reviewing current operational standards, communication, and the case for change
- Module 2 | Living the Principles through C.A.R.E.: the Communicate, Appreciate, Recognise and Encourage framework; the 4G Model; acceptable language; personal presentation

- Module 3 | The Human Benefits of Good Communication: effective briefings, SMART goal setting, positive and constructive feedback
- Module 4 | Effective Attention
- Module 5 | Remaining Professional
- Module 6 | Leading by Example

Five Principles for Conduct provided a shared ethical foundation across all sessions: Fairness, Honesty and Integrity, Human Dignity, Service, and Quality. These principles were treated not as compliance requirements but as genuine guides to how people could choose to show up, in the office, at the window, and out on the network.

Progress across all six modules was signed off formally by both the trainee and the coach, creating a transparent and shared record of each individual's development. A mid-programme review meeting took place in October 2022, allowing the leadership team and Clear Thinking to assess progress, identify priorities, and adjust the approach before Wave 2.

A significant physical change

One of the most tangible changes to emerge during the programme was the removal of the glass screen at the front of the SDC at Rigby Road. This was a significant moment, symbolic as well as practical. What had been a physical barrier between managers and drivers became an open, more welcoming space.

Managers described the impact directly:

"With the window gone, I can talk to more drivers as there is a bigger gap."

"Removing glass from the front window creates a bigger open space and encourages staff engagement."

"Drivers have started talking more and are coming to the window."

"Drivers interact more with me as a result of this."

Staff who had previously signed on and walked away were now stopping to talk.

What changed

The working environment

When asked what had changed about their working environment, participants' responses were grounded and specific:

"More professional. Better understanding of the need to change culture."

"The office seems to be working well and people are acting differently."

"Communication – it's improved. Professional – appropriate language. Support – Market St office being manned."

"More open conversations. Less use of bad language. Willingness to live the values."

"A start has been made to break down the barriers between Rigby Road and Starr Gate."

How managers described their own behaviour change

Across both waves, participants were asked to identify which behaviours from the programme had changed most noticeably in themselves. The most widely selected areas were:

- Presenting themselves professionally and using acceptable language; selected by every respondent
- Good customer awareness, internal and external
- Taking responsibility for their own behaviour and leading by example; the single most selected theme
- Showing pride in the brand and embracing change
- Problem solving, prioritising and taking appropriate action
- Using the C.A.R.E. Model every day

The change in how managers related to drivers was described with refreshing directness:

“Softer in my approach with my body language and my voice.”

“Far more professional now, less ‘pub banter’ chat.”

“I find myself thinking before I speak more than ever. Knowing how I decide to treat or deal with a situation can have a great impact on others.”

“Good morning. Good night. Thank you. I think I’m even more patient and respectful.”

The impact on drivers

Managers were also asked about the positive impact their changed behaviour had on the operation. Their responses revealed a shift not just in individual conduct but in the relationships that hold a transport operation together:

“Drivers becoming more open and approachable.”

“It makes people feel valued and not feel forgotten about. Not just a number.”

“Drivers confide in me more. Can be more open with me. There’s a level of trust.”

“Positive feedback, more people approaching me for advice with problems and for a general chat.”

“I feel the drivers will help me out if needed to cover work if I treat them with respect and am courteous to them.”

Recognition and appreciation in practice

The C.A.R.E. model prompted managers to think carefully about how they were recognising and encouraging good performance. Their responses showed a genuine shift towards more human, personal forms of acknowledgement:

“Being polite and respectful doesn’t cost anything, small steps as ‘thank you’ or ‘have a good day’ works.”

“By giving feedback to drivers, if I see them doing something really well out on the network then I’ll tell them.”

“Feeding back to them what has been seen or said, discussing how they have supported the company values and how important their role is within the business.”

The MD’s perspective

We asked Jane Cole, Managing Director of Blackpool Transport Services at the time, to reflect on the programme from a leadership perspective. Here is what she told us.

On what changed operationally

Jane described measurable improvements across three areas. Driver satisfaction increased noticeably, with managers becoming more approachable and respectful, fostering a culture where drivers felt heard. This translated into higher satisfaction scores in the annual staff

survey and improved engagement feedback. The Unite Union were also engaged to contribute to the 2023/24 Safety Plan from a frontline perspective, ensuring their issues were heard and acted upon.

There was also a measurable reduction in short-term sickness and stress-related absence, with drivers showing up more consistently as they felt more respected and listened to. Management confidence grew significantly: managers displayed greater consistency of behaviour and decision-making, sharing a defined ethical and professional framework that strengthened cross-depot collaboration. That improved collaboration contributed directly to a six figure saving when the two control centres for bus and tram were brought into one centre in 2025.

On having Clear Thinking embedded in the live environment

Jane was clear about the significance of having a Clear Thinking team member working inside the operation rather than delivering off-site training. In cultural terms, she noted that the depot atmosphere became more professional, more human, and more cohesive. The team were living the values of fairness, dignity, and service in daily practice, in a live working environment, in an open and honest way, where unacceptable behaviour was being called out in real time.

What she would say to another MD

Jane's recommendation to a fellow MD considering this kind of programme was straightforward:

"It changed the quality, speed and impact of the learning to immediate and contextual, under real operational pressure. It directly improved organisational performance. It strengthened the visibility and credibility of the leadership team and improved frontline relationships. And it aligned the culture change with organisational strategy."

What participants said still needed to happen

The feedback process also captured where more work was needed. Participants flagged priorities that reflected their deepening understanding of the operation and their growing sense of responsibility for it:

- Drivers giving greater respect to supervisors and managers, with behaviours in the office brought into line with the professional standards expected elsewhere
- Market Street needing a more consistent management and supervisor presence across the full working day
- More direct contact between management and drivers, a desire for the gap to continue to close
- Better communication between levels, with senior leadership visibility remaining an area for development

These observations speak to a management team that had genuinely internalised the purpose of the programme. They were not just reporting change but thinking critically about the fuller picture.