

## Starr Gate

### Management Coaching Programme

Blackpool Transport Services | Tram Operations | 2022

---

## 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 at Starr Gate, the operational home of Blackpool's iconic tram network. The programme was commissioned by Blackpool Transport Services as part of a wider commitment to organisational development, and ran across 2022.

What made this programme distinctive was the embedded approach. A member of The Clear Thinking Partnership team worked directly alongside managers in the live operational environment at Starr Gate, building the trust and understanding that genuine development requires.

Learning extended beyond the coaching room through Keeping on Track, a structured activity that placed managers onto the live tramway service to observe, reflect and apply what they were learning in the real world.

## The Starting Point

When the programme began, Starr Gate faced challenges common to many transport operations: inconsistent management practice, a need to raise professional standards across the team, and an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between managers and the drivers and conductors they led.

Communication between the office and the frontline needed to become more purposeful. The physical environment of the depot, including the layout of the management office, reflected older ways of working that created invisible barriers between staff and their supervisors.

The ambition was clear: to develop a management team that could lead with confidence, communicate with genuine care, and create the kind of environment where drivers and conductors felt valued, heard and proud of the organisation they worked for.

## The Programme

The coaching programme comprised **six structured modules**, each building on the last. It began by reviewing the current operation and embracing change, before moving into the

C.A.R.E. framework – Communicate, Appreciate, Recognise and Encourage – alongside the 4G Model, personal presentation and accountability.

The middle modules explored the **human benefits** of good communication, effective team briefings, SMART goal setting and constructive feedback, before turning to effective attention and remaining professional. The programme concluded with a focus on leading by example.

Running alongside the modules was **Keeping on Track**, a structured embedding activity that placed managers onto the live tramway service as paired Track Buddies. Using a dedicated observation guide, they recorded what they noticed across the environment, standards of service and onboard conversations, then brought their reflections and actions back to the team. Learning applied in the real world, not just the training room.

**Five Principles for Conduct** ran as a thread throughout every session: Fairness, Honesty and Integrity, Human Dignity, Service, and Quality. These were not introduced as rules to follow but as values to reflect on and internalise, explored through facilitated discussion about what they meant in practice for each individual manager.

Each participant held their own signed **record of progress** across all six modules, providing a structured and transparent approach to development that respected both the individual and the organisation.

## What Changed

Feedback gathered from participants at the end of the programme painted a clear picture of tangible change across the depot. The questions asked were demanding; they required participants to be honest about what was different, not just describe what they had learned.

### The working environment

Participants identified striking shifts in how Starr Gate felt as a place to work:

*“Tidy. Calmer. More professional. The office is organised and structured.”*

*“Drivers and conductors are happier. More positive and improved communication.”*

*“Attitudes have changed. There seems to be more pride in their environment.”*

*“Office is more people-friendly. The way people talk to each other, everything seems so much more professional.”*

A significant physical change accompanied the programme: a new, more welcoming office space was created in the old reception area. It became a place staff wanted to engage with rather than walk through, and, as one participant put it, felt like a proper office environment.

### How managers described their own behaviour change

Participants were asked to reflect on thirteen behavioural themes and describe what had changed. Presenting professionally and using appropriate language was selected by every respondent.

Using the C.A.R.E. model every day, taking personal responsibility and leading by example were chosen by the majority. Pride in the brand, customer awareness and problem solving were also widely recognised as areas of real change.

Participants described the real-world impact of these changes in their own words:

*“How individuals have realised they are a manager or supervisor and they don't have to wait to be given permission to do something.”*

*“Doing what we say we will do, or explaining why we can't.”*

*“Holding each other accountable in a constructive way.”*

## What participants said still needed to happen

The feedback also captured what managers felt still needed to happen, a sign of genuine engagement with the bigger picture. Priorities included extending the same standards to drivers and conductors, maintaining momentum through daily briefings, improving cross-department communication, and confirming the organisational restructure to give teams stability. These responses signal ownership. Participants were thinking beyond themselves and into the wider health of the operation.

## The Managing Director's Perspective

**A team transformed |** The most noticeable shift was confidence and professionalism emerging consistently across the team. What started as a group of individuals working reactively and independently gradually became a cohesive leadership team with a shared sense of responsibility and pride in the operation.

Communication changed significantly. Managers became more visible, more approachable and more purposeful in how they engaged with drivers, conductors and each other. Conversations became constructive and solution-focused, and there was a marked improvement in personal accountability.

The change was not superficial. You could feel a calmer, more respectful culture developing at Starr Gate. Small things mattered: the condition of the office, the tone of conversations, the way people greeted one another.

Several individuals really grew into their roles. Some quieter members of the team became noticeably more confident, whilst others learned the importance of consistency and leading by example. What impressed me most was seeing managers begin to recognise the influence they had on the culture around them.

**And a depot transformed too |** The management office changing both physically and culturally was a particularly important moment. It symbolised the wider transformation, moving away from barriers and towards openness and accessibility, and became a space where staff felt welcomed rather than managed from a distance.

Operationally, the biggest change was consistency. Before the programme, standards could vary considerably depending on who was on duty.

As it progressed, the leadership team began talking with one voice, with a far clearer and more unified approach to communication and expectations.

**Professionalism in practice** | The programme helped managers understand that professionalism lives in everyday behaviours: how people speak to colleagues, handle difficult conversations and represent the organisation.

That shift had a direct impact on morale. The frontline team asked for a pool table, which was sourced, with proceeds going back to the team for morale improvements at their own discretion.

Managers also learned that maintaining standards and showing genuine care for people are not contradictory. The C.A.R.E. framework became a practical daily tool rather than simply a training concept.

**The impact on safety** | The improvements in safety, near miss reporting and the implementation of a Just Culture were visible not because people were told to change, but because they understood why change mattered.

**Why the approach worked** | The embedded approach taken by The Clear Thinking Partnership was instrumental. Spending time within the live operation, getting to know the personalities involved and understanding the pressures managers faced every day meant the coaching felt meaningful and relevant. This was not a one-off workshop. It was about creating sustained behavioural change through trust, challenge, accountability and practical support.

*“To any fellow MD considering this kind of investment: programmes like this are investments in operational culture, and culture ultimately drives performance. The quality of leadership at depot level has a direct and measurable impact on morale, staff retention, customer experience and results.”*