



Avanti West Coast and the OPC have pioneered extending Non-Technical Skills (NTS) for Station Managers, identifying critical skills to enhance safety, and strengthen leadership with lessons that could benefit the wider industry

Beyond the frontline: How NTS is shaping station leadership

The OPC and Avanti have broken new ground by applying NTS to leadership roles, in a project profiling the critical NTS for effective station manager performance. Traditionally, NTS implementation has focused on frontline roles such as train drivers and signallers. With rising passenger volumes and increased leisure travel post-COVID, Avanti wanted to target leadership teams to model safety behaviours, apply NTS learning to enhance performance, and strengthen oversight on higher-risk passenger train interface operations.

"Stations present a range of safety risks for managers, from frontline issues to broader oversight responsibilities," explained Iffath Ahmed, Business Psychologist at the OPC, who worked on the project. "Whether at the sharp end of dispatch or in a leadership role, safety is central to every aspect of station management."

Why station managers?

Avanti recognised that while frontline roles had long benefited from NTS development, station managers also oversee safety-critical activities. The Station Directorate presented an opportunity to trial a new approach and explore ways to enhance safety and performance. From coordinating train dispatch, managing contractors or leading teams through disruption, managers' decisions directly affect safety and service delivery. Focusing on managers first allowed Avanti to identify the critical NTS and cascade learnings to team leaders and frontline staff.

Craig Kerr, Senior Safety Manager at Avanti West Coast, said: "Our employees are our greatest asset and central to keeping customers safe, so it's vital we equip them with the necessary skills to support them in their roles. While most development is geared towards technical skills, we recognise that NTS contribute to safety and operational performance. This new training approach supports our station managers to build their leadership expertise, perform even more effectively, and gives them another toolkit for safer operations."

Project overview

- **Initial profiling sessions** with station managers identified key NTS using group discussions, job analysis questionnaires and a critical incident technique capturing examples of good and poor performance.



Image: Avanti West Coast

- **An online survey** asked managers to rank the critical NTS and highlight their strengths and development priorities.
- **A one-day workshop** introduced the top five NTS for station managers, showed their application through real scenarios and guided managers in creating personal plans with practical techniques from the OPC.

Station managers responded extremely positively to the different stages. They found the one-day NTS workshop practical and valuable to their role. Over 85 per cent of delegates rated it 'Very Good' or 'Excellent'. More than 90 per cent agreed it would enhance their professional performance.

Some research insights

Resilience and emotional control emerged as particularly important NTS. Station managers often lead during disruption, managing passenger flow, customer dissatisfaction, and staff under pressure, all with the need to maintain safety. Strategies for handling stress and staying calm in unforeseen situations were also a focus of the workshop.

The research also highlighted people-management behaviours closely linked to safety leadership. Approachability, fairness and open communication encourage staff to raise safety concerns without fear of reprisals, supporting individual performance and wider station safety culture development.

Why is this important work?

Dr Stephen Fletcher, Occupational Psychologist and Joint CEO at the OPC said: "We believe this is the first time NTS profiling has been applied to a managerial station role. It shows that insights from frontline safety-critical roles are transferable to leadership teams, with real potential to enhance safety, performance, and staff engagement. By defining NTS for station managers, Avanti West Coast also has a framework to strengthen recruitment, development and performance management. Other rail organisations could also apply NTS to managers with safety at the forefront, helping to strengthen station operations and passenger outcomes."

Anita Brown, Head of Innovation and Engagement at Avanti West Coast, said: "We're always exploring new ways to drive performance and make our stations safe and welcoming for customers. It's often really valuable to take initiatives that have been successful elsewhere, like NTS with frontline teams, and apply them in a new context to enhance performance. By focusing on our station leadership, the benefits of NTS can cascade throughout all station staff, helping drive safety culture, and providing safe and consistent journeys to, from, and through our stations." //

Could NTS profiling help transform your Station Leadership teams? Find out how the OPC could help.

admin@theopc.co.uk

01923 234646

www.theopc.co.uk