

Steps to Change Podcast: Episode 4

Allen: Hello and welcome to this episode of Steps To Change, the podcast where we explore learning and development topics, organizational behaviour change, and practical ways to inspire people to act differently through the lens of our Steps To Change model, See it, Own it, Change it, and Live it. On this episode, we're exploring the question, what makes effective and engaging anti-harassment learning and development programmes and we'll share what we've learned from creating anti-harassment content for different regions across the globe. I'm your host, Allen Liedkie, and I'm joined on this episode by Jahnvi Kamath. Hi, Jahnvi. How are you?

Jahnvi: Hello Allen. I'm doing very well. Thank you. How are you?

Allen: I'm doing very well as well. It's great to have you on this episode. So, Jahnvi, for the listeners out there who might not know you, who are you? What do you do at Steps and what brings you to this episode with us today?

Jahnvi: Thank you Allen. I am a Client Relationship Director. I'm based out of India. I've been working with Steps for the last twelve years. And of course, I started off as an actor, but over the last few years have worked on various programmes enabling Steps To Change as well. And I have primarily most of the programmes that I've worked with at Steps, have been in the space of harassment or unconscious bias. So, I am very passionate about the topic. That's why I'm here and I'm excited to explore this conversation.

Allen: Well, thank you for that, Jahnvi. And I know that we recently had the opportunity to partner and work on a programme for a global organization exploring anti-harassment. And so, I think what I'm excited to get into today is just that concept of what makes a great anti-harassment programme, but also kind of start to understand the differences in how it manifests itself from around the different regions around the globe. Let's start with the big question. What makes effective anti-harassment learning and development programmes?

Jahnvi: I think the first step in any intervention around this is for clients or for the people within the firm to really understand what harassment is. Many a times people associate with a certain type of harassment, but without really understanding what does harassment actually mean and who defines it. I am a strong believer that when we find that out for our own organization or for our own teams, for our own people, that's when we can begin the step towards really developing a very in-depth conversation or an intervention around harassment.

Allen: And I guess, Jahnvi, in that sense for our listeners, what do you mean by what it is in terms of harassment? Just unpack that for us a little bit.

Jahnvi: So, I think what it is in terms of one, of course, as we all know, it is about the receiving end, the person at the receiving end at the other end, and how they perceive it, what they are feeling about it. But it's also important for people to understand how behaviours, actions quite unintended, quite unconscious, might be impacting people in a very different way. Right?

So as a first step, like we speak about in our behaviour and change programme in Steps To Change for people to really See it, for people to really understand how behaviours or even slight microaggressions and nuances

can really impact people and the environment and the culture it can create without even realizing it. I think that's very important for people to first discover. Right?

I remember the programme that you spoke about earlier when we kind of collaborated, we realized that while in the organization we define what harassment meant, when we played it out rather in different regions, we realized it would mean very different things in different places. The way it manifests could be different. The way it plays out could be different. And something that's absolutely acceptable in one region could also be different from a different region. Right. So, the cultural nuances play a big role and for everyone also to have a consistent messaging around it. Right.

So, while there are regional nuances to be different, the messaging needs to be consistent around what defines harassment, what constitutes harassment and where do we draw the line and who draws that line. For people to really, really understand and absorb that by experiencing for themselves, not experiencing situations, of course, but experiencing what good behaviours can look like and what impact that it can create on people, I think that becomes very important in this conversation.

Allen: I think one thing for me on the journey I guess I have been in creating content in this space is I think some of our clients, not all of them, have come in with the viewpoint that it's just sexual harassment, right? But actually, and while that's a really crucial understanding and subject area to explore, if that is a challenge that your organization may face, it's very important to have those conversations. But one of the things we like to encourage our clients to do is kind of think about the broad spectrum of harassment because they all kind of can link to each other and inform each other. So, things like, of course, sexual harassment, bullying, gossip, harassment that happens on social media, that's a developing area that we're seeing. So, it's really about helping people understand that it's not just this siloed subject that's within the harassment thing, it's actually all may be connected in a way.

Jahnvi: Absolutely, Allen, that's a very good point that you've made. And sometimes it's also interlinked. So, it's important for people to get, like you said, a broader understanding, the broader perspective, it's also interlinked. Very recently for an organization, we were having a discussion and when we had an initial conversation, it seemed like the challenges in the firmware were only around sexual harassment rather. Right. And when we got into the research and got into the deep dive and the diagnostic phase, we realized that this actually comes from a particular bullying or sexist behaviours which have been led to this.

You know, somewhere for people to, and then we've explored how we can just get people thinking about harassment itself and the broader understanding of what harassment means. And it brought out simple things, and that conversation brought out simple things in team outings and in team bonding, the kind of games you play or the kind of activities you run. And is there an undertone of some kind of power dynamics in the way of your game is being played or an activity that you're running and how that could lead to people feeling a particular way or feeling a particular way in which, they respond to that activity.

You know, as you said, harassment is not just about one isolated incident, right, it is about multiple, little subtler microaggressions, subtler smaller incidents, comments maybe sometimes, which just pile-up and lead to really a feeling of harassment. And I think that's very important for people to understand as well when we are speaking about learning in organizational context.

Allen: That's really interesting. And what's jumped out for me there, Jahnvi, is this idea that we almost, a lot of people may come to us when they think, oh sugar, we have a problem, somebody's reported the kind of sexual harassment piece, right? But actually, if we need to go back and look through the journey that's maybe

led up to that, so the question is not how do we solve for this very egregious moment that they've come across, which is absolutely not acceptable in any way, shape or form, but what's the systemic behaviours that have been manifesting themselves that have led up to this point? So, it's almost getting back to kind of working backwards, if you will, going back to where did the behaviour start from, really.

The question I have for you, Jahnavi, is in our experience of delivering programmes, what's been the kind of barriers or stigma that people have, or participants might have when they think they're going to be joining a programme on anti-harassment? What's their kind of initial defence that they might bring into that thinking?

Jahnavi: That's a very, very interesting question and something we really need to explore on the subject as well. I think culturally, I'm speaking maybe from an India context, but just the word harassment is a very loaded word, right? And all of us have our correlations to that word based on our experiences or based on what we think that word means. And sometimes it could be a personal barrier where people think, oh, what is this going to be about etc, etc? Is this applicable to me or not? So, this goes back to people really need to understand what harassment is in the first place.

But the larger reason why I think people are a little hesitant or little, you know, not so sure about this is because maybe sometimes this thing that you brought around that people relate to one type of harassment, right, that could be also a particular stigma, especially in a country where I come from. I live in India, and here, when you speak about sexual harassment, it's a very difficult topic. And many times, people wonder if it's them, am I the one, you know, feeling that this is wrong or is everyone is speaking about it? Unfortunately, in many organizations, even in the society, people don't openly speak about harassment, people tend to think that it is on the receiver rather than the giver itself, especially when it's starting up.

So, some of these it's mostly, I feel, a personal barrier or a cultural barrier that really doesn't enable people to openly talk about it. And when I think about it, there's like a demonic perception of harassment, right. And like you said, when we make it about the broader perspective, when we talk about the larger behaviours, I think people will ease up a bit more around it. So, the communication becomes very important around why this is important and why our organization is doing it, relating it back to our own values or the culture of respect, maybe that the organization kind of promotes, these are the things, I think, that can enable people to open up a bit more in terms of this topic as well.

Let's face it, none of us want to be, if I come to the programme and I realized that, oh my God, I have said something like this to someone in the past, how comfortable am I actually saying it out in the open? How comfortable am I owning this behaviour of mine, right? And of course, we are not talking about the obvious behaviour. Of course, none of us listening to this podcast, so none of us in these organizations will even think about that. We're all good people. We intend to be really good. But sometimes I might have said something out of the lack of understanding or without understanding that it is a trigger to another person. And that might have been over a period of time if I kept repeating a sort of a microaggression to somebody else. And we don't want to. It takes us time to be able to accept it and face it. So, when we see it, it's also important that we own that aspect.

And I have seen in my experience that while people have come with hesitation, the first 15 minutes, they do not talk. But once they see the conversation unfold, then they kind of said, oh my God, have I not made jokes about a person from this community and always thought it's fine because everybody else is making jokes about a person from this community? I never saw this as harassment. So, then it becomes easier to own it when you realize that it is your own barrier that was stopping you from understanding the topic a bit.

Allen: A couple of things I want to pick up on there is, I think the point you made earlier on around the stigma is around people maybe don't think that I exhibit some of those behaviours or that's not me, I'm not a bad person, right, so I don't really need to be here. Or this is just another programme on what I can say and what I can't say, and I just need to kind of tick the boxes.

But it's really what I'm hearing you say, it's about helping people understand that kind of grey area of harassing behaviours, right? It's not the edge cases which are very clearly demarcated within an organization of what is absolutely unacceptable. But it's really crucial for organizations to allow people to explore that grey area but then also for participants to have that realization that actually, as you were saying there, oh, I might be saying this or doing this and that can tip into a bullying behaviour which then over time then turns into a harassing behaviour. So, it's a real, that ability for us to create dramas and scenarios that really allow people to see it and have that kind of aha moment of oh my gosh, that joke I was making, I had no idea that was a harassing behaviour, and I don't want to do that. Help me understand what I can do differently. I want to own the fact that I need to do something different here now.

Jahnavi: Absolutely. And just these grey areas that makes very interesting conversations because sometimes if you're part of a majority group or if you are more homogeneous in a way, you might not even realize that this is a challenge or an issue. Right? So, it's important that we understand what it could mean to different people as well. I think our sessions sometimes have enabled people to really realize oh, it is not okay just because a few people have heard it around, me participating in it is actually contributing towards increasing that feeling within the theme of the firm is another aha moment that I think comes up during some of these conversations as well.

Allen: Okay, Jahnavi. So, just for our listeners, let's paint a little bit of a picture here. So, we've just helped the client kind of understand what behaviours are showing up. We've done our research; we've got them understanding the different types of behaviours that are happening within the organization. What does a typical programme, even the one that we worked on together, what would a typical programme look like?

Jahnavi: Yeah. So, I think like we said, the first thing for us to define is what it means within the organizational context. We do the diagnostic, we try and understand and then, as we always do, hold up the mirror, what are those behaviours, what are some of these microaggressions for really people to dissect and dive into it. For people to understand the different types, I think we kind of incorporate that into our programme as well and allow people to have a conversation really about what it might mean in the organizational context, but what it might mean to the people who are involved in that situation as well. So, we do that.

We then also provide people opportunities, as we have done, to really explore how what speaking up can look like, what maybe are the right words to use, how do you create it in a non-threatening safe environment? Why it doesn't always have to be about a confrontation or a conflict. It doesn't have to be that. It could be just simple micro-sponsorship moments, right? So we really get people to explore and identify what those could be and how they could really have those conversations where they could be the people who are beginning that change journey within the firm, beginning people who think about it differently, beginning to open the doors of this entire conversation with the larger groups as well, and how they can take it back to their teams. Maybe sometimes they will encourage upward feedback, right, if it's about high values.

A lot of these little nuances, little tools and techniques that could be applied in your day to day conversations or part of how you run meetings maybe and stuff like that, right? Just exploring that a bit further with the participants, not only in the session, but also when we talk about Change it and Live it, ensuring that is happening even within the system and different opportunities apart from the Steps intervention as well.

Allen: And so practically that can show up as maybe a virtual programme. It can be an in the room programme. We can use video to do that. But at Steps we use drama in all aspects that we do. And so being able to really, as you say, hold up that mirror through the different drama scenarios that have been based on the research that we've done so that people really start to see the behaviours playing out and begin to identify and recognize, oh, that's a harassing behaviour, that's what we mean by it so that within the session they're able to start to Own it and Change it and Live it within the different workshops or interventions that we run.

Something that I want to explore just a little bit here with you is this idea of that homogeneous culture, right? So, if you're in a majority group of some sort, we sort of can adapt behaviours because that's how the majority of the group behave. But if you are in a marginalized group, you are going to be experiencing behaviours in a different way than that majority group. And what I want to link to this though, is that several things happen within that kind of concept.

So, let's say maybe harassing behaviours are being displayed in some capacity, what we hear in our programmes is that some people in a majority group, they don't want to say anything because maybe it's not happening to them and they go, oh, it's not my problem to deal with that's HRs, or that's the person who's being harassed, they need to go and deal with that. So effectively, they're not challenging any of that behaviour, so the behaviour is allowed to continue and then it can grow and balloon and snowball into something that then becomes a big problem.

But then equally, on the other side, if you're a person from a marginalized group, like there might be a sense that you don't want to speak up because you'll have this whole group of people who might think oh well, that's not true or that's not really what's happening, don't think that way, we were just joking or we were just having a little bit of fun or whatever it may be, so then you have this kind of perfect storm of this place where people just end up not saying anything. In your experience in this subject area, like how do we help people shift that type of thinking to help create that culture where challenging is celebrating?

Jahnvi: Yes. You know, that's an interesting point that you brought out, Allen because when we speak about challenge, just the other day I was in a conversation with a couple of other people at Steps and we were talking about how the word challenging or speaking up itself, people feel that am I doing something out of the norm? Is this going to upset the balances? Because am I the only person feeling this in the room, right?

So, I think one thing we've done in the interventions that have been a part of is to enable people to feel that speaking up is good, right, speaking up is important. And if it is even that one person feels that way, it is that one person who is impacted. Why does it have to be about something that a larger group is thinking? And I might be the only person not kind of belonging to this kind of thought process. Right? So, I think it's important to bring up speak up conversation in any anti-harassment programmes because that was the crux of kind of touching or targeting where this begins from.

Unlike a lot of different behaviours, because this is also very personal sometimes and it's a very sensitive matter, harassment is, let's face it, I think most of the topics we deal with is one of the most sensitive matters to people as well, one of the most sensitive topics. For people to feel safe to speak up and for the organization or for anyone, the leader, or the team to constantly have that mechanism where we are encouraging people to speak up, even if it's your voice is the only voice that makes the place think very differently, that's okay because that is what is going to contribute towards getting to the next level. That's what's going to help us move forward in this conversation in a way. To enable that tomorrow, if one person has given a perspective, tomorrow we know that next time I'm in the conversation, I have to consider this person's perspective because maybe other people feeling the same way as well.

Allen: And I just want to pick up here, I think this is a really crucial part of the change of process within the Steps To Change, right, so not only are we changing behaviours here, but actually a bigger one is changing mindsets around speak up and around challenge and getting people to see that as a supportive mechanism rather than a tattletale mechanism or getting someone in trouble or going against the flow or the majority group.

And so, spending time with participants in that space and going speak up isn't necessarily just about whistleblowing, right? And it can be about going, oh, hey, actually having a curious mindset will allow me to say, oh, Jahnavi, maybe that joke I made, I just want to check that that's okay. Or it could be speaking up about your own behaviours and checking in with people. It can also be about challenging a close colleague that you go, hey, maybe that behaviour wasn't helpful because of this reason. But having the conversation is more important than not. Because if you're not checking in, if you're not challenging, if you're not speaking up in supportive ways, then we get to the point where there's maybe legal problems and people leave work or reputations are tarnished within the wider world and so forth.

Jahnavi: And creating those micro moments to be able to speak up, I think that's important when someone feels more safe to speak up. And like you said, speaking up doesn't have to be escalations or speaking up is just standing up in that moment to say, you know what, I don't know if that really makes me feel comfortable or I don't know if that's something we want to speak in this team about or do we want to make that okay within our team.

But the interesting thing is you don't have to be the person at the receiving end to be able to say this as well. Many times, I feel when we do these sessions, especially in India, people think that speaking up is for the person who is experiencing it. But it's really when you speak about Allyship in various contexts as well, it's also about the people who are observing, who are being quiet and passively encouraging maybe some of those comments, behaviours, to be able to just take that moment or leverage their own privilege to say, hey, you know what, do we really want to go down that way? Do we really want to speak about this? And that, itself, can be very, very helpful in getting people feel comfortable.

Allen: There's the old scenario that, you know, this has actually played out in some of our dramas that we have in the different programmes. But there's a line inevitably in a lot of the dramas where a character will say, oh, I could have told you that was going to happen, or I could have told you that this would have been reported that way. And you think, well, there's a real learning moment for people to go well. If you thought that that was going to happen, then you're the example of what you just said, that kind of passive person who's just observing things. And we all have to play our part in helping people understand in terms of those behaviours.

And I think something I'd love to explore here is just the kind of the cultural differences of what we found on the journey of creating this global programme. And what was really interesting challenge that we had to address was the client was very clear in terms of what the organizational expectations were for anti-harassment from a global perspective. But as we started having these conversations from a regional viewpoint, so we delivered this content in North America and the UKE and then also in India, we very quickly found out that how harassment shows up in those regions. It might have similar behaviours, but where those behaviours and mindsets come from are very, very different. And so, I think just hearing from you a little bit more about kind of what are the different types of harassment that are showing up in India, and then I can maybe speak to some of the things about the US and how that is playing out in some of the different scenarios?

Jahnavi: Yes, in India, we've noticed that a lot of the focus is still on prevention of sexual harassment. It is called Posh in India, right? POSH, it's an abbreviation for prevention of sexual harassment. But once we've done some of these workshops, we're thinking about changing it and people living it, we realized that we also have to tie it up to sometimes just certain behaviours that could be around just conversations, jokes, comments, things around what people say, some of the word batons we use in the organization. But how that could lead to people perceiving people in a particular way or perceiving leadership sometimes in a particular way.

We noticed that bullying behaviours also come to the forefront. And what's interesting in those conversations is the leaders never saw it as bullying behaviours. They just saw it as how we've led the team. So that's how we've culturally grown. And then to pause and say, oh yeah, it is maybe enforcing someone to be a particular way or do something a particular way, which is the way. I like it done, right. So, uncovering that, exploring that has been one of the newer topics that we've been doing quite a bit within India as well.

Allen: And we had the opportunity to kind of highlight that within the programme that we were working on together and the fact that some of our biases and mindsets from the outside world based on societal structures kind of feed into how we might communicate with our colleague. And actually, in our Steps programmes, we often say we can't solve the problems from the outside world, but what we can do is help create an agreement for what good cultural behavioral looks like inside the four walls of a business. And so how do you then help people recognize the fact that maybe the jokes you make with your friends outside of the office actually inside these four walls can start to be leaning into those harassing behaviours or the mindset you might bring?

And then from a US perspective, I think what we found was the US is a lot more of a litigious society. And so, I think the barriers for people engaging in these conversations is a fear place of going like, well, I don't want to do or say anything wrong, so I'm not going to say anything because then it can't come back to me as I've done anything inappropriate. And so, you know, how we're helping to shift mindsets internally within the businesses we work with is to say, okay, yes, there are some legal lines that we, of course, need to be very clear about crossing. But actually, to be a good citizen within an organization and help create that culture that the businesses want. There is an expectation within these four walls of what we're expecting people to show up and to call out behaviours, or to help reduce them if you see them happening.

We all need to help each other out in terms of living it. Because one element that I think was universal in all the programmes, both in the US and the UK and India, was this sense of when you have new hires coming into an organization, a lot of times they've just been coming straight out of university or college or whatever programme maybe that they have been on, or this is their first job in a public space, they don't necessarily have the understanding of what the behaviours look like. So, what might be funny on social media can actually nowadays, if you have similar behaviours with colleagues through apps or whatever, that can be used as a way to show that there are harassing behaviours happening.

Jahnavi: I want to share with you, Allen, this is very interesting what you said. And some of it, if I speak about this, is it going to come back to me something we see in India as well. And I think we pretty much see it in various cultural contexts. What I wanted to kind of share with you is sometimes some of these programmes, people have come to us and in our discussion, people have come to and say, okay, in the context of this group, if I understand that we need to be right, that we have to say the right thing is to consider everyone else. But if Anna and Johnny, for example, know each other outside of office and we are friends, is it okay for us to say have these conversations outside because there are no one around us, it's just the two of us, right? So, what do you think about that, and do you see that impact and do you think that comes back to play when we're also with a social group or when we are with our teams?

And I thought that's a very interesting conversation that we have because people think when we speak about this topic, we really need for people to think about, to challenge themselves. You know, why we are talking about what is right for the organisation and sometimes, as we said, with the different regions, it might have to be considered with what the culture in the region and some of the acceptable, non- acceptable things within that region is. It's also important for us to look at ourselves and think about if we want to personally grow, is this a great conversation to have with a buddy of mine who might also not be associated with the firm, but what is my personal ethical value? Turn the flashlight on yourselves kind of a conversation becomes very interesting when we talk about it in a more deeper level.

Allen: Absolutely. I love that thought. Turn the flashlight on yourself, right. I think none of us are finished books and we all have learning and development we can have in our personal lives. So that's a really great thought to help us end the episode on. Jahnavi, this has been a really fantastic exploration of the subject matter. So, I think that's about all the time we have left out. I just want to thank you so much, Jahnavi, for joining us. And thank you, listeners, for joining us on this episode.

If you'd like to know more about Steps and Steps To Change, make sure you visit our website, find us on LinkedIn, sign up to our newsletter. All the links will be available in the show notes. And if you're interested in how Steps could partner with you or your organization to support your needs, send us an email or fill out the form online on www.stepdrama.com.

What would you like to hear us talk about? Is there a subject area that you'd like to hear us explore? If so, drop us an email and let us know and we can pick up on that. Maybe put that into a future episode. As always, thank you so much to the production team. This is not a one person show. We could not be doing this without you. I am your host, Allen Liedkie, and we look forward to having you tune into our next episode where we'll be discussing feedback, exploring people's mindsets towards it and effective ways to give and receive feedback.

Until next time, thank you. And remember, you too can See it, Own it, Change it and Live it.