Allen: Hello and welcome to this episode of Steps To Change, the podcast where we explore learning and development topics, organisational 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 discussing the question, what are courageous conversations? And how do you actually have one? I am your host, Allen Liedkie. And I'm joined on this episode by Paul Mason. Welcome, Paul. How are you?

Paul: I'm very well. Thanks, Allen. How are you?

Allen: I'm doing very well, Paul. So, for the listeners out there who may not know you tell us a little bit about yourself, what you do at Steps, your role, and any insight you might have on the topic today?

Paul: So, I've been working with Steps on and off for about the last seven and a half years, I think it is now. I am currently called the Resource and Planning Director, which means that I am responsible for all the processes that we use internally and for managing the distribution of workload amongst the team. I also look after a couple of key kind of client accounts, and occasionally end up doing some design of some of our programmes as well. So, I've been involved in learning and development, probably about 30 years now. And in terms of courageous conversations, I guess most of my experience has come from looking at the subject through a performance management lens, I suppose, and thinking about it in the context of leadership development.

Allen: And I would venture to guess that in your career history, and maybe in your current role, you've probably had to have several courageous conversations at some point?

Paul: Yeah, I think that would be fair to say. I think, yeah.

Allen: Well, great. So, Paul, I'm really pleased that you were able to take the time to join us today, and yeah, I'm looking forward to diving deeper into the subject matter with you. So, before we get into the actual Steps to Change process, and how we design content around courageous conversations, let's just spend a couple of minutes just level setting getting on the same page, if you will. What are courageous conversations? Paul, I feel like I'm hearing this terminology a lot more lately, and so I think it'd be really good to make sure we're talking about the same thing and we're getting a shared understanding for the listeners out there.

Paul: Yeah, I think you're right, I don't know whether it's a new label for an old topic or whether it's something that people just become more aware of. But I agree with you, I think it's certainly a topic of conversation that's very much at the forefront at the moment. Now I describe it as any of those conversations that make you feel perhaps slightly sick in your stomach, when you know you're going to have to have one, those sorts of things that you know they're the conversations that you need to have, but you don't really want to.

I often use that analogy that says, if there's conversations about the sorts of things that you'd kind of like to sweep under the carpet, if you can, but the problem was the longer you keep sweeping things under the carpet, the bigger the lump in the carpet gets, and sooner or later you're going to trip over the lump in the carpet. So, it's those kinds of conversations. And I think a lot of it has to do with

mindset really about in terms of we talk about being courageous, but it's about how you feel in your head about having those conversations that will determine how successful you are eventually and having them.

Allen: I guess it says what it is on the team, right, have the courage to have those conversations and really go places that make you feel uncomfortable?

Paul: Yeah, absolutely. And be brave and do it in the moment, rather than keep putting stuff off, as I said. Yeah.

Allen: Absolutely. That's sage advice, not just in our working lives, but I think in all parts of our lives have that. Okay, so courageous conversations, those difficult conversations, the ones that you don't want to have maybe that you're sweeping under the carpet, but why would they be important to be developing the skills for in business? Why might clients be coming to us to say we need to develop programming focused on courageous conversations?

Paul: I think there's a number of drivers, for me, that probably are influencing the thought process around the importance of having those kinds of discussions. And I think some of that is probably in the post-COVID world, probably a lot might be driven by just kind of the environment that we find ourselves in now. I think lots of organisations are finding themselves trying to do more with less that we could, and I think the economic pressures that exist currently mean that as organisations we need to get things right; we need to enable people and empower people to perform to the best of their ability. So, I think probably some of those conversations will come out of some of those pressures, actually, that exists currently.

And I guess, there's that continual recognition that actually as a leader or manager in an organisation, I guess there is a bit of a clue in the title really, isn't it, it's about leading and managing people. And actually, one of the key elements of that is helping people perform well in all areas, in all aspects of the job that we employ people to do.

Allen: And I think, gosh, there's so much uncertainty, I think in the business landscape at the moment in so many different ways that needing to be able to have direct or challenging or developmental conversations with your team, as you say, to really help make sure we're getting the best out of the resources that we do have or the individuals that are currently working with us. But also, sadly, we know that in some sectors, like the tech sector, it's a really tough time at the moment. So those leaders and those managers need to be able to have courageous conversations about people exiting the business, if you will, or shifting their role or what have you. So, it's a really important skill to be leaning into.

Paul: Yeah, I agree. And I guess it's not only leaders probably that need to be prepared to have some of those conversations. I think probably, we all have a responsibility, whoever we are, whatever we do to pick up those conversations where they need to happen, and they can be around all sorts of topics, and then you can have those peer-to-peer, you can have them with colleagues, I think.

Allen: That's a really great point, Paul. So, it's not just leaders. It can be peer-to-peer as well. And something else that comes to mind for me is we say a lot in our programming, that culture and

behaviour really comes from top down, right. So, if we can get those leaders, if we can get those managers inspired to really lean into having courageous conversations, as they say, get comfortable with being uncomfortable, if you will, then that's going to set the tone for the rest of the culture. And therefore, as you say, your colleagues in your peer-to-peer conversations, it can have a positive impact on everyone else leaning into this as well, when a challenging situation may come up.

I appreciate the experience you have in your career about coming at this from a sort of performance management perspective. But I would also say I'm hearing courageous conversations come up when you think about diversity, equity, and inclusion topics as well. Like if, for example, in programming on ally ship, how can you empower the delegates in a session or the participants in one of the learning programmes to really start to have conversations that maybe they've never had before, so just having it for the first time needs courage, but then actually going somewhere that might feel really challenging from a societal point of view but equally as important in terms of creating culture and developing strong relationships and really supporting that space?

Paul: Yeah, I agree with you. In that kind of context, so I think people get uncomfortable or don't want to get it wrong, so really you end up saying nothing at all, actually. So, I think this is about having the courage to drain some of those things and have those checks when it's necessary.

Allen: Yeah, that sweep it under the carpet mentality, right?

Paul: Exactly. Yeah.

Allen: I think there is probably an axiom that you get better at having these conversations the longer you've been in your career, right. You just get more, I guess, more comfortable with having them. But if we can empower those younger generation to actually have one-to-one conversations, not necessarily leaning into technology to kind of get that feedback, if you will, I think that could be a really important skill for them to develop as they grow in their careers.

Okay, Paul, so I think we've got a really good understanding of what we mean by courageous conversations, right, those difficult conversations that might make you feel sick to your stomach or the conversation you're trying to avoid that you want to sweep under the carpet. And we recognise that they can be useful for many different areas such as performance management, diversity, equity, and inclusion, etc, which we'll explore more as we go through the Steps To Change model as well. So, let's now move into the 'See It' phase.

Paul: I think there's a couple of things for me. I think, first of all, is that recognition, when they are watching the scenarios that we've written unfold, there's that element of thinking, oh, I might have done that sometimes. Yeah. I can see me having those kinds of things or not saying those kinds of things. So, I think first, there's that recognition that this actually might apply to me as an individual. And then there's that kind of subsequent thought that says, so maybe there is a slightly different way of doing this. Maybe there are some alternatives that I've not thought of. So, I guess typically, the sorts of things we might see in those scenarios would be managers struggling to have those conversations because they are hard, because it's sitting down in front of somebody delivering some tough messages is not always easy.

So, we might end up having a look at those examples where we have a long conversation, which actually goes nowhere really; everybody leaves thinking, well, we've had a good conversation, but actually nothing has really been said, because we've struggled to deliver the messages in a clear and kind of understandable way. We might look at a conversation about feedback conversation, for example, and actually what we see is it becoming, I suppose, more of a punishment than a developmental kind of conversation. So, it becomes a telling off rather than looking at how we can learn from what's been happening and the experiences that everybody has.

So, I think, what we need to do is make sure that we reflect the fact that these can be difficult for both parties involved in a conversation actually. It's difficult as a manager to be relaying the bad news. It's probably not that easy if you're the one sitting in the other chair to be receiving some of that bad news. So, to get the balance right so that it's the message is delivered in a way that is digestible, comfortable, and actionable. It's really hard.

Allen: I think the interactive and the drama-based approach is almost perfectly suited for this type of development.

Paul: And that's where the drama approach is really valuable. Because you don't normally get the option to have to be in that third position, if you like, as an observer of those conversations. If you're the one trying to deliver the message, you've only seen it through your eyes. It's easy, therefore, because you're so focused on what you're doing, and what you're saying to completely miss the impact that you're having on the person that you're trying to have the conversation with. So that being able to take that observer position is hugely valuable, I think, in that example.

Allen: Yeah, totally. And other scenarios that we could lean into sort of touched on this in the opening from the inclusion space really around ally ship or having conversations about race or gender identities or what have you, right, so you can play out those really uncomfortable conversations. Because as you said, what's really important is that people freeze, they'd rather just not have this conversation, and they'll just forego it rather than facing it head on. And I think in that space around inclusion, and diversity and equity, and we see that happening quite a lot.

Paul: You're showing people where there is an opportunity to be a supportive ally in situations, probably feels a bit uncomfortable. But as you say, it's about looking at how we can do that best.

Allen: Absolutely. And then just before we move on to 'Own It', also, this idea of upward feedback. I think a lot of organisations are leaning into this idea of 360 feedback. But what we understand from that concept is well, yes, it's an ideological approach that they'd love to have, but actually, the more junior members of a team are struggling to really actually provide that 360 feedback upwards, if you will, so that the feedback loop can be really kind of jointly owned, if you will.

Paul: Yeah. There's a whole compensation. So, if you're a junior member of staff in an organisation to be telling your boss the sorts of things that you think they could improve on, it's not going to be an easy conversation. So yeah, there's more opportunity to build those skills for dealing with those sorts of situations.

Allen: Yeah. So there you go, lots of ways to sort of hold up that mirror in the 'See It' phase for the participants, really to get that visceral connection to go, okay, I recognise these behaviours, I've been a part of those conversations, the ones that were not so successful, and maybe I've been on the receiving end where they've not been successful, and maybe I've got a role to start playing to help those. So that's 'See It'. We've held up that mirror, they're viscerally connected now to the content. And then we want to move the participants into the 'Own It' phase of Steps To Change. So, what's happening for the learners at this part of the learning journey and Own It?

Paul: I think, for me, this is the point at which they go, okay, I've seen the reality of the situation, I've seen that maybe there are other ways of doing it. And this is the bit where they start to think so do, I actually want to do something about that? Do I want to take some responsibility in changing the way that I have those conversations that might help improve the outcome for everybody? Is at this point that you kind of start to surface people's mindsets towards having these discussions.

So, I think there will probably be people in their thinking, actually, do you know what, this isn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. I thought I knew everything about having these conversations. But now I look at it, actually, this is quite tough. And maybe the approach that I have been taking perhaps isn't as effective as I thought perhaps it was. So, it's about helping people to move their mindset a bit to thinking, okay, I can do something different here and just getting clarity in their heads about what that looks like.

Allen: This is a really kind of important step, right?

Paul: Yeah.

Allen: Because like anybody who's either been in maybe a manager has been in a role for quite some time, and they're really successful and they're seen as one of the sort of top performers in their role, recognising that you need to do something different or shift your behaviour or that maybe the way you're having these conversations right now could get better, is a little bit of a tough pill to swallow for some people, or they're just blinded to the fact that they go oh, man, I'm good, I manage my team super well.

And one of the questions that I think is really interesting to ask in the 'Own It' space here is going well, if you think you're really good at this, what's your evidence? And when was the last time you actually asked your team members, how am I doing with these direct or challenging or courageous conversations?

Paul: Yeah. And if you don't have the culture where that would feedback is acceptable and well positioned, you're probably going to get an answer that says, oh, you're doing great. Because I don't want to have that risk having anything kind of saying anything kind of uncomfortable, because of the consequences that might have. But I think you're right. I think it's really interesting in that there will be people in times that look at a conversation and think, yeah, okay, I could do. What do I want to do about it? Do I want to do anything differently? No. I'm just going to carry on as I am. And I guess, some of that then is about having that responsibility for saying that's your decision. Just think about what the consequences of that might be on other people that you're working with.

Allen: Yeah, absolutely. And then I also think there is a sort of reality check of where you are on the spectrum of your confidence in these, right. So maybe you've watched that, you go, oh, gosh, I wasn't as good as I thought and now, I feel like have I been kind of getting this wrong the whole time? So how do we keep that confidence and just help build on experience by providing skills as we go through the Steps To Change model for those individuals?

I also think there's a little bit here, just before we move into the 'Change It', is I'm preaching to the choir here with you, Paul. But I think the learning and development community loves to come up with terminology for these types of things. People might walk into the room and have a mindset about oh, gosh, what is this courageous conversations lesson I'm about to walk into? But just to recognise that you got to meet people where they're at today. And if calling it courageous conversations is going to help tune into it, then great. But equally, let's take those people along with us that kind of go, oh, courageous conversations, I don't want to do that.

Paul: As an industry, we're great at giving new names to things and creating buzzwords and stuff. But I think you're right. I think a lot of this has been going on well or badly for many years. And as you said, maybe rebadging will just kind of resurface the importance of it actually.

Allen: So, the participants, they've seen it, they've owned it in terms of mindsets, skill sets, where they're at, where's the work for them, the developmental needs, are they willing to contribute to this approach going forward, and then we will want to move people into Change It? And yeah, I think the 'Change It' piece, it can be quite a lot of fun, but it can also be quite clunky for some people, right? So, expand on that a little bit, Paul, what's happening in 'Change It' when we talk about courageous conversations for the learners?

Paul: So, I think for me out of the four steps, this is always the interesting one, isn't it? Because this is where you have to try and think okay, so I get it conceptually, now I've got to try and do it. And changing habits and doing things differently from the way you've done things for years is always hard. Now, I think for me, there's a few things that we can do here that kind of assist that process. So typically, if we're going to do it, this is the point I think in our workshops where we would talk about any of the kind of supporting models, frameworks, whatever it is that helps us had that more structured kind of conversation. And we will often do that. We will introduce models that we are familiar with, that we value in terms of the contribution we think they can make, or indeed if organisations have got their own preferences around the models and frameworks that they like to use, we would include some of that.

I was looking back this week actually about some work that a lady by the name of Kim Scott produces around a topic that she calls 'Radical Candour'. I won't go into it using this. There's tonnes on the internet about it if people want to explore it. But I think she talks about a management philosophy that's based on caring personally and challenging directly. So, it's about recognising that the person that you're talking to is important, and that you're not trying to punish anybody, but equally, there are things that need to be said. There's tonnes of stuff on the internet, and I'd really recommend people to have a look if they're interested in this as a topic, because there's some really great stuff about that.

So, this is the point in the proceedings where we would kind of introduce some of that stuff. Because I think if I look back on stuff that I've done over the years, and I've had this conversation with colleagues, the biggest successes have come where we've been able to provide some kind of framework actually for people to use. And I think in these kinds of conversations, having that kind of structure in your head about what's going on and how to follow that is really valuable. Because it's very easy to get lost and sidetracked, when you're talking about difficult subjects to get taken off course or to lose your thread or whatever it is, only that kind of framework stuff can be really valuable.

And this is about where we start talking about what are the skills then that can help you here? What are the skills that you can develop that will enable these conversations to be better? What does great listing look like? Once, what are great questions, how do you use those? How do you use coaching in these kinds of situations? What's the structure you might want to bring to any of those conversations that you're having? And then it's about giving the participants an opportunity to try some of that stuff out and see what that actually looks like in practice.

And I think there's a couple of ways probably that we might do that. One of those things that we might start off with what we described as a forum, which is where the participants as a whole group kind of take over, if you like, and start steering the conversation. So, what they are actually doing is giving advice to one of our actor facilitators, maybe the manager in that situation that says, why don't you try this? Have you thought about this? Why don't you use those words instead of these words? So, it's a very safe way of being able to try stuff out and see what it looks like. Because you might have in your head the thought that well, I might try saying this. And actually, getting somebody else to try that for you is quite a safe way to be able to do that. So, we might try some of that, raise all the ideas are valuable. We'll try anything you like, if it works, great. If it doesn't work, or let's just try something else, until we find something that does work. We've got that great ability in that kind of environment to say, well, let's just pretend that never happened then and let's go back and see if we could try something different.

And then I guess the other way that we might give people an opportunity to try some stuff is through a skills practice session, where actually the participants themselves are having the conversation with one of our actor facilitators. So, they might take the role of the manager in that conversation, for example. So, we tend to do that in small groups where it's feels safe, and you're not surrounded by loads of people. We base those practices, typically on some scenario that maybe we have found during the research that you talked about in our conversation. Might be that we get participants to bring their own examples, they've got lots of experience. So perhaps they can bring examples that we can use to replay some of those conversations. And I've seen some great examples where people go, I had this really horrendous conversation yesterday, I'd really like to try it again and find out where it went wrong. So, this can be really valuable.

And again, when you get stuck, it's about getting help from the other people in the room, and saying, I had no idea what to say now, and drawing on that talent that's in the room to see, well, what could I do, what could I say, what could I try? And I think for me, you've got kind of learning going on at two levels there. You've got the learning for the participant who's actually in the conversation and they're

learning from what they're trying and putting into practice. But equally, the other people that are sitting in observing that conversation are also learning by observing and seeing what's going on and what's working.

I describe 'Change It' is that bit where you try on that new pair of shoes and find out what it's like to shuffle around in them and see where the pain points are and having an opportunity to try and play with that a little bit and see what works and what doesn't work.

Allen: I think what really stands out for participants here is that, oh my gosh, there's like an emotional human being on the other side of this conversation, right? And I love what you said, Paul, is that earlier when you were talking about 'Change It' is that about this sense that you're talking to another person, and I think one of the real key skills for courageous conversations that I sometimes forget to think about the other person, and then when I actually start having the conversation, then suddenly, I'm going oh, sugar, this feels very different than what I practise because maybe that person is upset today or something I say is triggering to them. And so then suddenly, you've got all these different dynamics to deal with.

So I think that's a real aha moment for learners and 'Change It', it's great to have your structure which is super helpful for guiding your thinking and keeping yourself as these things can get emotional, keeping yourself grounded in the framework so that you can, as you say, use those good questions or reflect back how you see the person across from you responding or what have you. So, really, really powerful learning development here, as you say, as they're working in large groups or small groups, but actually practice, practice, practice is key. Because as many of these courageous conversations as you have, each one of them can be different and there's no one way to have them which can be paralysing for some people thinking oh my gosh, I have to have a different conversation each time. But like anything, the more you do it, the better you'll get. And not to belabour your analogy, one day the shoes will fit well, and you will be able to navigate those waters more comfortably, I guess. Yeah.

And I also don't want to forget, and I think this is going to be a nice way to segue into 'Live It', is the use of video or digital eLearning resources in this space can be a really, really beneficial guide for people. And I'll unpack that a little bit more as we move into 'Live It'. But I just recognise the fact that we've talked about in the room. But there's lots of ways to develop this content from a digital and video perspective as well.

Paul, they've seen it, they've owned it, they're changing it through practice through leaning into that model, or what have you and putting it into practice, understanding that these conversations might not always go the same way, building those ability to ask good questions, or tune into listening or what have you. But if all we do is have a good session, either in the room or an eLearning module and then the participant goes back to their desk and does nothing different, then we're wasting everyone's time, right, nothing's changed. So, what's happening for participants to really help them continue the learning journey outside the room to 'Live It' and really make courageous conversations business as usual, in their organisations?

Paul: I think that's probably where your point about digital resource actually is particularly relevant. So, we do work in face-to-face environments, either been alive in room or on virtually a lot. We equally, we're very comfortable providing those kinds of digital resources. And they can be a great support actually, when you go back and say, okay, let me just remind myself what this was all about. Let's have a little look again and find out what we were talking about here. Let's replay that conversation and see what did we say was good, what worked, what didn't work. So, I think they can be a really useful supporting resource after an element of face-to-face work.

I guess you could probably do it the other way around as well actually. You could provide some kind of digital resource that says, let's get everybody on the same page before we start so that actually we know what we're talking about here, we've got some background to what the topic is about, we've kind of started to think about what some of the skills might be, and then you have the opportunity to focus more on the skills practice element, I suppose, if you're having some conversation or face to face element.

I do think that this topic, particularly, you need something face to face for me, I think. That's where you're going to get the most impact, I think, when people have experienced those conversations. And I guess in terms of going forward, I think you're right, we've had a lovely time, we've had a great session, and we go back into the poison pond and face all the same problems that were there when we left before we came on this lovely experience and nothing changes.

So, I think there's a very old phrase, "We're talking about what gets measured gets done". So, for me, I think part of that 'Live It' phase is thinking about so how do we build this into our leadership expectations? If this is what we want our managers and our leaders in this business to be doing, how do we build that into our systems? How do we look at how that happens? So, I think there's that need to kind of create some kind of shared understanding and agreement within the workplace that says, this is how we do it here, these are the kinds of conversations, and this is the norm of what we're doing. And interestingly, we're about to embark on a piece of work with a client that is kind of recognising that that says, we have these expectations of you as a leader in our business, let's be really clear what that looks like, and how we will hold you accountable against those expectations as a business for having these kinds of discussions.

And I think it's probably taking opportunities to talk about it actually, to make sure that having courageous conversations is part of conversation actually. We talk about it at town halls, at team meetings or departmental meetings. We're talking about where it's going well. We're talking about where we've got opportunities to do things better. And I think as you said earlier, I think, sometimes there might just be that bit about checking in with your own team actually, and thinking, well, how's this going then? What is it 80% of the learning in any situation happens on the job, doesn't it? So, let's do some of that on-the-job stuff and have those conversations with their peers and colleagues, get that feedback, use their help get their support, to be able to do stuff. Get some coaching from others. Maybe I'm going to have a difficult conversation tomorrow. Can you and I just sit down and talk about how that might go. It's got a bit of a dry run, if you like, as to what that looks like.

So, I think, the 'Live It' for me is about using every opportunity to ensure that the topic is just part of the normal way of doing things around here and taking opportunities wherever we can to practise it, talk about it, play with it whatever it might be.

Allen: I love that idea of especially from a leadership perspective of standing up and saying I had to have a courageous conversation this week. And do you know what, I fell flat on my face: it didn't go as well as I thought but you know, this is what I've learned from it. And in an example of 'Live It' from a digital perspective that we had recently, we did some work with a global organisation and their North America financial services firm, and we partnered with them to create just in time resources. So, we filmed some challenging conversations that were short, maybe 30-45 seconds and they then had those resources.

So if a manager or colleague knew they were going to go in and talk about something that was going to be difficult, either through a feedback module or an inclusion perspective, or what have you, they could go back to those videos, watch it play out, get a few like key reminders of what good structure looks like and good questioning and all of that so that not everybody has the luxury of always having the practice run with somebody, but at least there's a version for them to see something play out, recognise what works well and kind of remember the skills that they learned in the session. So, lots of ways to support that 'Live It', as you say, and to make sure that it's in being embedded in the culture, and it's the way they do things around there.

Well, Paul, that is about all the time we have left for this episode. So, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a really engaging and thought-provoking discussion.

Paul: You're very welcome.

Allen: 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 or find us on LinkedIn or sign up to our newsletter. All those links will be available in the show notes.

If you're interested in how Steps could partner with your organisation to support your needs, you can send us an email or fill out the form online at www.stepsdrama.com. Is there a subject you'd like to hear us explore? If so, reach out to us via email or on our socials and let us know. As always, thank you to our production team, we couldn't do this without you. I am your host, Allen Liedkie, and we look forward to you tuning in next episode where we'll be discussing how to inspire the movable middle in organisations to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Until next time, thank you and remember you too can See It, Own It, Change It, and Live It.