

Steps to Change Podcast: Jessica Episode

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 idea of the Movable Middle, and exploring ways to encourage their involvement in supporting an organisation's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. I am your host, Allen Liedkie, and I'm joined on this episode by Jess Leahey. Welcome Jess, how are you?

Jess: I'm alright. How are you doing, Allen?

Allen: I'm very well. Thank you. Jess, for the listeners out there who may not know you, tell us a little bit about yourself, what you do at Steps and any insight or experience you have on the topic today?

Jess: Thank you. So, I am a Project Design Manager at Steps. So largely what that means is that I have a hand in most parts of the project in some parts of the design, depending on the project, from the beginning and the creation with a client all the way to the logistics and the delivery of that programme. I am also on the Senior Leadership team for the US as well as one of our team members hoping to grow our footprint here in the United States.

Allen: And share a little bit more about some recent insight you had with the subject of Moveable Middle, because this is a sort of newer topic at Steps that we're starting to explore, and you had a hand in designing one of the earlier programmes. So just a little background on that, please.

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. So, this particular programme was drafted up for the ALFDP, and that is the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals. And we heard a lot from folks that are our clients or folks who work in this space Diversity Professionals about the Moveable Middle; that word Moveable Middle could also be sometimes known as the Frozen Middle, as it might once be known and a lot of folks are having conversations about the Moveable Middle currently, Kenji Yoshino is one that comes to mind. Some research that we did was also from the Neuro-leadership Institute as well, to kind of dive into, what is the Moveable Middle? And largely what that means is the leaders or individuals in an organisation who are not exactly staunch opponents of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but they just might not be actively involved in it either. And they may or may not be open to change and may or may not look to support DE&I efforts, if they were actually provided the right tools, or strategies or information, of why it could matter to them.

Allen: That's super helpful, Jess. Because I know for myself, I've heard this term being batted around in DE&I circles and hadn't fully really appreciated what the concept was. So that's some really helpful context to give us an overview of what we mean by Movable Middle for our conversation today. And I think something that really stands out for me in what you've shared there is, that it's not necessarily individuals who are actively pushing against DE&I efforts, or individuals who say it's not for them, it

largely sits within the group of people who were maybe just not necessarily involved, or see a reason to get involved, or even maybe aware of an organisation's DE&I efforts that are going on.

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. It's a bit more about that ambivalence to the topic, not necessarily anti to the topic, right. And it's especially important right now, because when we talk about moving the needle, and what do we mean by moving the needle. Nowadays, right now, we've got lots of things happening in the ether of the world where there's extreme opinions and feelings and thoughts about things on different topics. And so, when that pendulum swings really far one direction or the other, it can become challenging for us to address inclusion to those who sit on either of those sides: we might say those folks who are real advocates for DEI effort or those who might be naysayers, if you will.

So that Movable Middle, rather than the Frozen Middle, I think we've got a little bit more optimism than perhaps we once did when we called it a Frozen Middle, right, it's we do believe there is opportunity for movement. And that ambivalence that we spoke about, they might not have often considered all of the ways that they could actually play a part in making their workplace more inclusive. And also, what's in it for them too? I think that's really important because it's not so much in a world of you have to be all on board, or all against, right. There can be things that you can find about the different forms of inclusion, that might be something for you, and that can be the thing that really brings that Movable Middle along. The challenging part is you have to find that thing and what that is and what that might be for someone is different for everyone. So once we discover what's important to them, use that as a stepping stone, get them more involved, and that can create that more inclusive workplace as a whole.

Allen: Kind of looking at the trends in the world at the moment, right. In the US, we had the Supreme Court decision to strike down affirmative action. We know that in the UKE region, there's been a lot of work that's been done on DE&I efforts, and so there's this sense that things are plateauing, or people have gone. Well, haven't we done all that already? And then other parts of the world, they have their unique challenges with it. So, what I think is really interesting about the idea of the Movable Middle, is that as you're saying, if we can find the entry point for them, and it will be different for every individual, how much more effective can those efforts be if we can really galvanise them to kind of get involved and have their voice?

And I think also to mention in this space is, a lot of times the Movable Middle are those people who sometimes don't feel like they can get involved, so they might be well intended. But a lot of the things that get attention can be like the ERG groups that are titled for the LGBTQIA+ community or like a Black Affinity group or for a Muslim community, right. So suddenly, those groups that are there to really help those marginalised individuals feel included in the organisation; for the majority group, they're going, oh, well, I can't be a part of those groups, but maybe I want to help some way. So, they're not really sure where they sit in these places. So, raising that awareness to actually no, we want you to get involved, we want you to be there, then we can start to help build a story that actually this middle people, they are movable, they're not frozen, as you say, we're more optimistic with their involvement.

Jess: Absolutely. And it's just as you said, right, that Movable Middle is the largest part of your organisation or your firm. And finding an opportunity to make that business case that there is

something for them in it can really help bring along folks so that they just don't feel like that's for someone else, that's not for me, or that's an extracurricular in air quotes, that's an extracurricular thing, a nice to have, not a need to have. Because I'm just here to clock in, do my job, do it really well and worry about my own career trajectory, which fair enough, right. But I think that there's something in it where you can actually move your career along with this and that actually can help you to make those connections and to be a part of what makes you a really great colleague, or someone to work with within the organisation.

Allen: Yeah, really stronger ally as well, right? We've talked about Allyship, so that definitely starts to feed into other bits of learning, which we'll unpack as we go through the conversation. Okay, Jess. So that's a pretty good sense of what we mean by Movable Middle, thank you for sharing that insight, really appreciate that.

And now I want to shift our conversation to focus on the Steps To Change methodology that we use to partner with clients to create work to support conversations in this space and development. So as with all programmes, especially when we think about 'See It', we will have done good quality research, speaking to a cross-section of people within an organisation to try to understand the great stuff that's happening when we think about Movable Middle or those areas of improvement. And then we'll use what comes out of those conversations to build content that's specific to their needs, not only from a theoretical need, but also the dramas that we'll write so that when we get into the room, and we get that drama up on its feet, it's going to feel like we're holding that mirror up, and they're really seeing themselves in it. So, what is happening in 'See It', Jess? What's some of the examples we're bringing to life when we think about the Movable Middle?

Jess: Sure. So, when we create programming, we really do make sure that we embed the learning into real people, real situations, things like that. So, it doesn't feel like we're kind of spoon-feeding these learning objectives, it feels like you're just kind of immersed in it, right. And I think that the way that we make that show up in the Movable Middle programme is we have characters who are essentially vehicles for learning, and they are kind of sitting in a world where they encapsulate more broadly the ideals of these three different groups that we talked about that obviously the Movable Middle, of course. And we also have that person who's that advocate, that passionate DEI advocate and they really do feel like it is a genuine part of their being at the firm and making sure that it's a full part of their time while they are working there.

But then there's also on that other side of that pendulum swing, the naysayer, we've started to kind of coin, and I think that's from the Neuro-Leadership Institute that they coined that. But it's sort of that, that embodiment of someone who as with all of our programmes, we try not to make anyone have full devil horns, or a full Halo. It really is about kind of how do you get someone to see perhaps what's a little bit behind the curtains for someone, what's a little bit going on for them as to why they might feel that way. So that naysayer might have been someone who's been working at that firm or the organisation for many, many years, very successful, and has real strong opinions and views on what they think success looks like in that organisation. And it can sometimes be really challenging to feel like things are changing.

So, we try to include those kinds of nuances as well. And when we talk about that Movable Middle, they are really the heart of that programme, because it's all about getting people to kind of want to bring them alongside and want them to find the thing that makes them passionate. So, unpacking those conversations with all of those three different characters can be really informative and build a little bit of empathy. I think, as we create that, 'See It' bit. So, we see some things play out, some reasons for people doing the things that they're doing and then we can kind of unpack that a little bit later on, which I'm sure we'll talk about in a second. Through that scenario, we base it on those everyday interactions, those missed opportunities for inclusion, or for empathy building. We get to see the different character share their mindsets. And we get to see the Movable Middle get maybe opportunities to be involved. But for all those reasons we already mentioned, maybe they're just not in a place where they're ready to do so.

And as with all of the surfacing of the mindsets through the characters, we want to keep the Movable Middle getting involved. So, we try to find all of those different opportunities, so then when we get to the next bit, the 'Own It' bit, we can start to say, well, okay, so where could that have actually happened? Where could we have involved that person? So even if we're not a diversity professional, we could be someone sitting in a meeting, having a conversation with someone and saying, well, have you ever thought about this, and start to try those on for size?

Allen: That's really interesting. So, what's really standing out for me in what you've shared there, Jess, is not everything can fit into a typical archetypal character, if you will. But actually, those three buckets that you've talked about of were people that are on the spectrum of getting involved in DEI efforts, that passionate person, the naysayer, and then the subject matter that we're talking about, that Movable Middle, I think that's a really good way to identify where individuals are, especially for participants within a session. Because I think a lot of individuals who are DEI-friendly and think that they're like involved might watch the scenario play out like a typical meeting scene when the characters are talking about like, oh, are you going to go to the affinity group tonight?

And then the person that's playing the Movable Middle be like, oh, no, that's for X group, I don't identify as that. So why would I need to go to that? And that can be the really powerful aha moment, right, because that's the whole point of 'See It'. We really want them to viscerally connect with seeing that play out and go, oh, if I'm really honest, that is me, or if I'm really honest, that's somebody else over there. And I hope they're watching because I know that could be a really good force for good. And I want them to get involved if I'm that passionate person, right. And then if you're the naysayer, oh, what's happening there? Why are you maybe like actively pushing against DE&I efforts? And what's going on behind the curtain for you there so we can get you into that Movable Middle, right? It's not about giving up on those people. It's about going, what can we do to kind of inspire you to get involved?

Okay. So that's a really clear piece of See It. So, what ideally, are we hoping for participants in the 'Own It' phase in a learning lesson that's focused on the Movable Middle? What's happening there?

Jess: I think one of the biggest takeaways we can get for this particular kind of programme is building a bit more empathy. I think, understanding perhaps if you are someone who sits in that Movable Middle, why it might be important for you to be involved. And one particular thing that gets a good

amount of, I would say, reaction or feeling in the room is when the advocate, that person who is the passionate person for these particular initiatives asks, why is the onus always on me? Why does it always have to be me that is putting in that additional labour? And then I think can open some eyes a little bit, you said, aha moment, I think that could be one too. And that can build a space where people can see that, yeah, people are passionate about it and people want to be showing up for these initiatives. And also, it can be exhausting. And also, it should be a team effort. And also there could be ways that we can normalise it, so it's business as usual. And so that everyone is on board for this and it's not just a specialised thing for a specific group of people.

So, I think that that's one thing that builds that empathy in the room or maybe some things that people are thinking quite often but don't say out loud because it's a place of work. So, in this magic of hot seating, we get to hear what people might be thinking.

Allen: When we talk about hot seating, what we mean is, you know after scenarios played out in the 'See It' phase, we then bring the characters to the front of the room or if it's virtually bring them back into the space of discussion, and the participants are being curious directly with the characters and asking them questions, right? So why did you say X, Y or Z? Or why didn't you speak up here? Or what made you not want to go to the affinity group? And the characters are responding honestly in surfacing all the things that you've just talked about under those different buckets, so that we can really start to have a healthy discussion around getting people to own where they are. So, through that hot seating exercise, we've got individual ownership and then we've also started to surface the collective ownership.

And just a couple of things to clarify, I'm really glad you mentioned maybe the passionate character who then is in the hot seating and saying, why do I always have to be the one that drives these things forward? And we know largely, that will be a marginalised individual who is either tapped on the shoulder to kind of be the leader of an affinity group, or sort of just it's assumed that because if, let's say the character is a black woman of colour, like suddenly she needs to lead all the efforts or be involved in everything, where it's like, that is really unfair to those individuals. And so, hearing them share that in the room can help other people who identify with those challenges really start to go, oh, my gosh, you know I feel that way too, I own the fact that maybe I'm exhausted, or I've spent all my emotional currency in this place. So, you start to have those people Own It and go, oof, yeah, I'm that person who kind of assumes that that person is going to handle everything.

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. And then we go to that final kind of archetypal character of naysayer and this can really run the gamut. And I think that it is a character who can live in a few different spaces, right, because I think that we've already talked about that fear of change, fear that maybe they are on the way out, but I think also it can even push into a space of there are some folks who genuinely feel like these are unhelpful practices. And so unpacking that a little bit, and kind of picking that apart, why is that? Why do you feel that way? What is that about? Not in an accusatory fashion, but just kind of to also learn a bit more, because it's helpful to know why people feel the way they do and what their thoughts are in this.

And I think that when we combine all three of those points of view, it can really create a broad conversation in the group, which is especially why I think hot seating is so fascinating, because no

two sessions are alike. It's all about the participants in the room. And while we will obviously we have facilitators in the room, who make sure that those key learnings are met, there are some things that maybe will be specific to that group, and what they find most interesting, or what they think is the most important conversation to have in that very moment when we talk about these three different archetypal characters but also the behaviours behind them and how they show up.

Allen: And by getting that collective and individual realisation of ownership, we can then start to move people into Change It, right. So, we've got all this the Meilleur, you have things, the mindsets, the whatever it may be that's out there in the open, which is all really, really crucial. So, let's move into that now. What's going on in 'Change It'? And what techniques are we using to help participants understand what they can do differently?

Jess: Yeah, sure. So, I think it's also a bit of turning some of the questions that we asked of those characters on to themselves. So, I think asking of themselves, where do you sit in your own firm? When you think about DEI efforts? And when you think about things that are going on within your organisation or your firm, do you feel like you can get involved? Do you feel like it's okay to be involved? And what is the thing that's holding you back? And how might you be able to shift that mindset a little bit? And I think then that kind of can open some doors for folks because it doesn't feel so confined to specific things that need to be done when we think of as DEI efforts, just more inclusion on the whole can be a massive help to a firm or an organisation.

Allen: Yeah, so using that wisdom of the crowd, right, so what would you all do differently here? Because a lot of times, the answers are already within the participants knowledge base, they just don't have time to reflect and kind of consider what to do differently?

Jess: Everybody, because of their different lived experiences, has some sort of knowledge to impart wisdom, to impart points of view that can be helpful. So, when we think about those questions, we start to get into a space of advice-giving. But I think, also if we're doing our job, right, those walls come down a little bit where people can be vulnerable. People can say I actually have felt like a naysayer at points in my life or I actually have been exhausted as an advocate and I don't know if I really want to continue on doing this because I just don't think I have it in me anymore. And then facilitating those conversations in a way where we can build it into a Change It conversation about, or what needs to change in order for you to be able to do these things? How can we make a difference? What are those little low cost, no cost things that we can be doing? I think those are always extremely important.

And I think some of the things that we learned, as we did research on the Movable Middle, was that idea of leveraging the normative influence. We spoke about this already, but just kind of how do you just make this normal? How do you make inclusion normal and making it business as usual, making these things something where this is just how we do things here? I think the less nowadays that we kind of get out our yellow highlighter and highlight it and then underscore it and bold it, probably the better. And the more that we can just kind of slip it in there, hide the vegetables, whatever kind of analogy you want to use doesn't really matter to me. But I think that the idea that this is just how things work here and get on board, because if you want to be a part of our really awesome culture, this is how we do it. I think that can be really helpful.

Allen: But just to pick up on that, I love that sort of normative influences. I think that's a really great statement. And what's interesting with this type of conversation in the 'Change It' space is it's not necessarily using drama, if you will, it's an exercise in getting participants to reflect on well, how are you right now involved in DE&I efforts? Like, let's spend a little time just like either writing it down, or just considering your business as usual every day. And if people can start to make a list here, you can then start to help build a case. So you go, oh, actually, I'm probably doing maybe more than I thought I was when you look at it through the lens of supporting those efforts.

On the flip side, you might go, oh, maybe I'm not doing as much as I was. And then going, okay, well, here are all the other ways you can get involved. So, we helped to give them a little bit of a roadmap and go, if you didn't know it, here are all the ERG groups, when are you going to go to your next ERG meeting for this group? How are you going to build a connection with someone from another group? So, it's not necessarily about a change through an acting exercise, but it's more about building that change through realisation of current behaviours, and then what their aims and objectives should be.

Jess: Absolutely. No, that's great point.

And: I then also, I love how we could use a forum exercise in 'Change It'. Again, I'm going to put you on the spot here. Do you want to talk a little bit about how like forum works and how it can show up? And then really homing in on specifically that Movable Middle character, how can we use forum to give participants practising having effective conversations for that Movable Middle?

Jess: Sure, I'll ask you to join me in an imaginative space because we've not done that yet with this programme yet. But I could imagine that forum could be very helpful for this particular topic. I think that it can be helpful in kind of how do we have... there's two different ways it can go right. It can be in a world of how do we have challenging conversations? How do we have difficult conversations when we have folks who have very different points of view? And how do we have that as a forum to kind of maybe have a conversation where we can see a little bit of each other's sides or just even working together more fluidly could be helpful.

And then I also think that there could be conversations within forum where we have someone who is maybe that advocate who sees something in someone who is a Movable Middle type of person and says to the group, I want to get them involved. They don't really know, how can you help me out with this conversation? And so, for those who aren't familiar with forum, it's basically kind of you go out to the audience, they give you the actual words to use in the conversation, you try them on for size, for better or worse, you go into the conversation, what happens happens. And then they go from there on to the next step of the conversation and they can say, well, wow, that was really helpful, or oh, I don't know about where this conversation is leading, what else can you help me with? That sort of thing.

So, you can kind of have a bit of distance as someone who is a participant in the audience to say, actually, maybe I think that this is gonna sound really great and I've try it on. And oh, maybe I would do actually do it a little differently next time when I'm the one doing it. Or that went really well and

now I have a lot of confidence for the next time I go into that conversation that I've seen this work, and I think that I know now a map or roadmap for how to have these types of conversations.

Allen: Absolutely. And I think there could also be another version of that where potentially someone in that Movable Middle seat is going to have a conversation with let's say, that passionate individual who's part of an ERG group and employee resource group, but the Movable Middle person isn't necessarily sure how they can have that conversation, they might be afraid to say the wrong thing, right. It's an identity that they've never really communicated with, let's say. So, you can use a forum exercise to help them sort of have a good quality conversation and demonstrate to the participants that a lot of that can be a perception barrier, not a reality, and that nobody's perfect, and we're going to make mistakes on our inclusion journey and say the wrong thing. But that's not the end of the world, if you will, right. But those growth moments can really help then support that movement in the Movable Middle to being more active.

So, the participants have seen it, Jess, we've held up that mirror, they understand the kind of three different sort of types of buckets that they might fall in, in terms of where they're at when we think about Movable Middle, they've owned that fact of where they are collectively and individually as an organisation. So, then we've got them thinking about, well, what are the things we can do differently, some personal discovery for individual goals, practising those conversations through a forum exercise. And then the last piece of the Steps to Change methodology is 'Live It'. How are we helping clients with the 'Live It' stage of the Steps to Change model?

Jess: I think the biggest piece of advice I could give on this is that the long game is very important. I think that it's no stranger to folks in the diversity, equity, inclusion space that some of these things take time, probably more time than a lot of folks want. But I think that when you're working with this group, they're not the Frozen Middle anymore, but maybe they're thawing out a little bit. I think that there's just like, you have to still give people grace as sometimes as challenging as that can be, to bring them along. Because I know that from what we hear from our clients or from various other professionals in the diversity, equity, inclusion space, they get pulled in so many different directions, they get told constantly from some folks we're not doing enough, we're not doing it fast enough, they need to see more and more and more. But then they're also being told by some folks, like, don't rock the boat, like, we don't need to make big sweeping changes here, things are working just fine. And so that's really challenging when you're being told this by all different folks within your firm or your organisation, and you're trying to kind of help as many people as possible.

So, when I say, the long game is important, I think it just basically means that you can't change someone's belief system overnight. You can't make someone do something. You have to kind of invite them along on the journey and kind of give them the opportunities as much as possible and know that you might have to do that again, and maybe in a different way and then maybe one more time before they feel like they can actually kind of take that first tentative step, which is why we talked about that moving of the needle, this is exactly where that programme sits, is kind of meet someone where they're at. Maybe it's just one small change, but that one small change can beget a lot of other things if we stay the course, right.

So, I think that's a thing that I think about as very important. And making sure that when you do find someone who has made that first step or a started to kind of show interest, that you are investing in that person, invest in those maybe one day advocates, also don't expect them to be an advocate, expect that they might find interest and engagement. And maybe that's good enough for now. I know that's not always a satisfying response. But I think it's a realistic one. And I think that it can be done in a lot of different ways. I think that we can build upon a programme like Movable Middle very easily to kind of say, well, what's the next step now? What is the thing now that you have kind of found your space, or your voice in whatever space of inclusion or any DEI efforts? What does it look like now to actually maybe put some allyship into action? What does it actually look like now to see microaggressions but then say something about them? Or to build a space where if you're a manager that that folks feel like they can be in a safe space, psychologically safe space with you? I think all of those things can be very important to kind of build upon the foundation, if you will, that's built in a Movable Middle session.

Allen: This is really helpful. So, I think you how I'm hearing what you're sharing is, okay, it's the long game, right, we can't necessarily boil the ocean. And actually, it's probably never going to be unfinished work, if we're honest with ourselves. So that realistic understanding that, great, they've been to a session, now suddenly they're all going to be champions. That's not necessarily the reality, but it's the start of the journey. So that understanding not only from the DEI professionals, but also from the participants, right that let's not suddenly say you are now you are an active member of the DEI community, and you get your badge. No, it's about the actions you take, right? So, if we can have realistic expectations.

And then another way to help then I think is just practically, right. So, what are the clear things that participants in a session can do in terms of ERG groups they can go to, people they can reach out to, the expectations as aligns with the values of an organisation, right. So really start to articulate those, so that they then feel like it's not they have to go away and boil the ocean, but they have a clear kind of directional path to starting their journey and being more successful in it.

And then the third thing you said there was, once we've got them understanding, and on that path, actually, us being able to go in at Steps and deliver more content on things like how do you be a good ally with allyship, or how do you identify microaggressions and reduce them in your behaviours, or creating spaces of psychological safety? That's a whole another spectrum of supporting that Movable Middle, not only developing skills, but then showing up in a way that's really continuing that developmental journey. So, it's not just getting involved as a good citizen, but it's actually how do we develop those skills as an individual so that we can support the broad spectrum here of inclusion. I love that, I think that's really awesome.

Jess: Yeah. I think there's also just a lot of other things that we can kind of suggest for folks to do that maybe don't live in a space where we are the ones kind of bringing the programming. There's things like you can have learning circles. You could have town halls where you get some folks in leadership positions to talk about what's important within the firm. We know how important that is to have. When we talk about culture creation and we talk about making things normal, business as usual, I think that's a huge one. So where are your folks who might be your go-to advocates in leadership space, but also maybe some folks who are a little bit kind of, oh, I didn't know that this person was

that involved or cared that much about inclusion efforts at the firm? That can be often some of the most helpful things that you can do. So, finding those folks, getting them alongside you can be really helpful as well.

Allen: Yeah, absolutely. There's so much power in story, right. I think metrics are important in terms of seeing change happen, in terms of demographic makeup or whatever those goals are from an organisation. But don't forget the power of an individual standing up at a town hall as you say, and saying, I was that movable middle, I didn't realise I wasn't getting involved, and here's the kind of success I've had, or the learning opportunities, right. Not everything's going to be successful, but you have to be involved to shift, if you will.

Well, Jess, that is about all the time we have left for this episode. Thank you so much for joining us. It's been really engaging, and I've thoroughly enjoyed it and thought it was thought-provoking. So, thank you. 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 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 you or 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 area 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 to the next episode where we'll be discussing how to manage diverse teams. Until next time, thank you and remember you too can See It, Own It, Change It and Live It.