Steps to Change Podcast: Episode 19 - Sarah Jane

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 discussing how to manage a cross-difference when leading diverse teams. We'll look at how a better understanding of your leadership style can enable a more effective working environment, as well as ways to flex your style to support a more inclusive team dynamic.

I am your host, Allen Liedkie, and I am joined on this episode by Sarah-Jane Georges. Welcome, Sarah-Jane, how are you?

Sarah-Jane: I'm very good, thank you, Allen, and thank you for asking me to be a guest.

Allen: Always a pleasure, SJ. And for the listeners out there who might not have heard your previous episode or know about you, tell us a little bit about who you are, what you do at Steps, and any insights or experience you have on the topic today.

Sarah-Jane: Oh, thank you. So, yeah, Sarah-Jane Georges, most people know me as SJ, Client Relationship Director at Steps, and I've been with Steps for seven years now. And the reason that I'm here today in terms of insights is that prior to joining Steps, I spent about 17 years of my career designing, delivering, and evaluating programs that look at leaders managing diverse teams from the lens of personality preference and communication style differences.

Allen: Absolutely. And one of the things that I really valued about that experience you brought to our teams last year was at one of our global retreats, you ran a session on understanding your style, if you will, your preference in terms of how you like to work, and we're going to double-click into a little bit more about what we mean by styles. But I thought that was a really eye-opening experience for me personally, because I kind of got a sense of, I'm not as much of a driver as I thought I was, I might actually be a little bit more analytical. But equally, and in terms of helping form the conversation today, seeing where my other colleagues thought they were and how they like to be managed or be approached or their working style was a real aha moment for me in terms of just ways to engage with the individuals that we work with at Steps.

Sarah-Jane: Oh, thank you, Allen. It's always good to hear that there were insights for people shared on these sessions. And I just think it's worth reminding listeners that when we talk about personality difference and different communication styles, we're talking about those many styles that are out that look at how people prefer to communicate.

So, for as leaders delivering and managing diverse teams, that's very much thinking about how does my team want to be communicated with? And I mean, those models, there's loads of them out there. I know you've referenced one in terms of driving style and driver style, but those models that look at those different axis in terms of more assertive, less assertive, more likely to come forward with things, less likely to, more time to reflect, more time to emote. So it's those models that we're talking about here.

Allen: Absolutely. And I think that's a really good transition into the kind of overview of what we're talking about today. So one of the things that clients have been asking me about in terms of our consultative approach, and I know this is true of other people within Steps in terms of partnerships with them, is people-centric management or managing across difference. But I guess, SJ, reflecting on your experience that you shared at the top of this episode, why would clients want to come to Steps or focus on content that really puts people at the centre of a management approach?

Sarah-Jane: I think fundamentally the message around having people at the heart of what you do, it's so, so important. And your question around why would people want to come to Steps to be able to think about that, it's because it's really easy to say, but it's very, very difficult to do. And why it's difficult to do is because we have our own ways of doing things right. And often leaders have said to me, I just want them to do what I want them to do in the way I want them to do it. And you think, well, they're never going to do that because they're not you, which we all know. But it's that knowing and doing gap again, isn't it?

And I think we've used this work in our inclusive leadership work for many, many years. Because as you know, we use the Gillian Shapiro Opportunity Now model that looks at the leadership competencies in terms of building a diverse team. And she's got adaptability, developing diverse talent and building inclusive relationships in there. Arguably, flexing your style and understanding needs of others sits underneath all of them. But I think it really does speak to adaptability. And when you break that down, it's that understanding and valuing, really valuing. So not just putting up with different perspectives, experiences, styles and backgrounds. Being able to flex your own style and approach, it's really easy to say, oh yeah, I can do that. It's really hard in the moment when you've got 101 other things going on to remember to do that.

And also I think something here that we often forget to do is that taking feedback. How am I doing at this? Is this working for you? And not being afraid to do that.

Allen: Part of the really big learning here is as we're talking about is how much have you actually tuned in to the person across from you in terms of how they like to work? We could make the argument that if you start there, then all those other things will potentially fall in place a little bit easier as you get into the instructional of everyday of tasks that need to be done.

Sarah-Jane: One of the things I often talk about in terms of styles is because people look at me and go, oh, but SJ, how can I be only one of these four? And no one is saying that. And I think it's always worth remembering that we're all complex and individuals. And that actually, I always think that when you're looking at behavioural styles and preferences, it's a little bit like maths. It's probability, how people are likely to behave.

And the reason I say that is because we're not one of these. We're an amalgamation and a mixture of many styles and many things make us the unique people that we are and the way we show up in the world. And I think it's really important to share that because often I get people say, but I'm not just one of them. But I think the lens of looking at your diverse team and then being able to look at them through styles and preferences in the way that we communicate is particularly helpful if there's tension. Or if you're thinking, why aren't they doing that? What do I need to do differently?

But I'd also like to broaden that out a little bit that it's not just personality. As a leader, a people-centric leader, you're really thinking, well, also what are the other demographics at play here? Is this the only female in the team? We work in a lot of male-dominated industries. What impact does that have in terms of how we communicate or neurodiversity or ethnicity or culture? All of these can have an impact as well.

Allen: Yeah, absolutely. I'm really glad you brought that layer into this, SJ, because I think one of the challenges that clients are trying to solve for is there's been a lot of really good work in terms of diversifying workforces and under the broad umbrella of all the points you've just talked about there, gender, neurodiversity, demographics, etcetera. So what happens when all of that wonderful effort that's been put into diversifying organizations, we bring diversity in and suddenly they're there and now people who don't have the skills to do people-centric management are going, oh gosh, I'm not sure how to manage all this difference? So this is definitely part of that learning journey that we would want to explore with clients.

And just before we go into how we develop content through the lens of Steps to Change, can we just be clear on the types of styles that you led us through at the retreat that we did, just because that will be our reference point for, I know as you say, there's many, many models, but just as we go through the Steps to Change model, I think we should have a shared reference point.

Sarah-Jane: Yeah, so we used Social styles and we looked at the different preferences in terms of amiable, analytical, expressive, and driver, and those different values. So amiable being much more around the relationship, expressive being much more around who they are and their ideas, and the driver being much more around get it done, and the analytical being much more around, hang on, have we stopped and thought about this, as four broad preferences, and they are broad.

Allen: Absolutely. And I think one other thing to point out here before we move into the Steps to Change methodology approach there is a real business case for this, right? So we know that retention is tough now, people will leave jobs if they don't feel like they're on the right career path or they're not being respected or valued or what have you: they'll just go and find somewhere else that they're going to be able to be themselves in the best way that they can.

And you said a quote, SJ, in our preparation for this, and I think I want to just bring it in here, I think you said something like, there's lots of research out there that shows that people don't leave organizations, they leave bad managers or leaders or something like that?

Sarah-Jane: They do. Yeah, that's right, and time and time again, that keeps coming back. And there's also lots of research done in terms of what motivates people, as we all know, but it's that really being valued, listened to when leading diverse teams.

Allen: So let's switch now to the Steps to Change methodology. As always, we have our four-step approach, which is See it, Own it, Change it, and Live it. And we always start with See it, and just to remind the listeners, that will involve really good research to understand the needs of the clients. We want to tune into the challenges that they're facing as an organization so that we can go away and write that bespoke or customized content that's going to feel really reflective of when we hold up that mirror through the different drama scenarios, when the participants are in the room, they're going, oh, this is really us.

So we'll have done all of that due diligence and good research and worked in close collaboration with our clients to design the content. But SJ, what would you say is happening and the sort of crucial learning aspect in the 'See it' phase when we're thinking about people-centric management content?

Sarah-Jane: Well, it's really helping managers, leaders, or people within the organization see those tensions and see how they play out. So we make sure that the scenarios linked to the different and the characters in those scenarios are able to portray those different personality or different behavioural differences and different preferences. And we make sure that it's slightly heightened. I know we can do all of them, but I find that if you make it not heightened enough, then people can't really relate to it. Well, what are you trying to say? I do this. I do this. So we do heighten it a little bit more.

But I think the value comes as well when we do the hot seats, because what you really watch in those hot seats on this style of event is one, people's reactions to those behaviours, and you will often get people saying, what's wrong with that? I think like that. I can't see what's wrong. And you'll have the rest of the room looking incredulously going, what do you mean, what's wrong with that? And that's what's wrong with you when you're in our organization. It can get quite personal at that point.

But what I love about the drama is that it cuts through all the words and gets you straight into the emotional reactions. And that's the bit that we need. And you've heard me say this before, logic on its own will never change behaviour.

Allen: So just to kind of paint a picture of how we're showing those different styles, it could be, let's say, in a typical meeting, we see maybe four different characters, those sort of archetypical, driver, analytical, amiable, and what was the fourth one?

Sarah-Jane: Expressive.

Allen: Expressive. I must not be an expressive person because that one doesn't stick into my head. But we'll watch them in a typical meeting, and we'll see how, as you say, that tension that you talked about earlier between the different characters of saying, like, are you even hearing what I'm saying in terms of the approach? Or why aren't you listening to or valuing my input? So you can play out these different, as I say, archetypical approaches, and it can be quite funny because people will recognize those things.

As you say, they're a little bit heightened. But really at the core of it, they're probably sat there going, oh my gosh, I had that meeting the other day. And every time I get into a conversation with SJ, that's what it feels like for me or something like that, right?

Sarah-Jane: Yeah.

Allen: You know, using you as an example, SJ, not as a reality.

Sarah-Jane: Oh, you can use me as both if you want. Because, and the reason I say that, I know this stuff doesn't mean to say I always get it right either. Because I think that's what's so hard with this. You're right, Allen. What that allows people to do is to really see why, if I'm an amiable manager and I've asked a driver to do something that they might not fully understood what I'm asking them to do, because I might have used language, as you can hear in the might that I'm using, that is evasive, lack of clarity. What exactly do you want me to do? And you see that time and time again. So it really does help people see what the issue is in terms of communication.

Allen: And from a behavioural point, going back to something we discussed at the top here at the episode is, you can tell people these different qualities, right. You can give them the bullet points of what they like. But that gap between that and the behaviours is the connection we're trying to make. We get it theoretically, but what does that mean in terms of my behaviours and my interactions with my colleagues? And so by painting that picture in the 'See it' through the careful research and what not, people are going, oh, okay, that's what it means when I see driver's behaviour show up.

Sarah-Jane: Absolutely. And it's what you're aiming for in those sessions is to really pique people's curiosity about difference as a leader.

Allen: And picking up on the hot seating points, so just to remind the listeners, hot seating is typically done after sort of drama scenario has played out, that office scene we were mentioning, and that's a time where we sort of get to do that big brother approach, if you will, of sitting in the chair in the diary room and they get to kind of really tell the participants how they feel about the way they experienced that meeting. And in terms of the learning journey, what's really happening here is we're actually saying quite a lot of the things that the participants are thinking but in a work context, you don't really get to say that to your colleagues very often. Or if you do, it's really eggy maybe, you're not really sure how to do that. So just expand a little bit more on that in terms of why that's an important part of the learning process, SJ.

Sarah-Jane: It's really liberating for people. You're absolutely right that they don't normally get to say that and they don't normally get to be as honest and as blunt with people. I think they find that cathartic on one level. But I do think that it also links to the fact that what people are doing typically at that point is expressing value judgments. And why that's really useful is that helps people see when you point that out later, and we'll get to that in a moment, why a value judgment isn't helpful in terms of your communication with people who have that particular style. And remember, it's often when, I use the word tension because I think that's probably a fairer way to say it than conflict. Sometimes there is conflict, but I do think that you get that tension sometimes between people. And I think it helps people understand and see why there might be some of that tension there.

Allen: Absolutely. And to add a layer or texture to those styles through the characters, we'll also get to start including the other elements of diversity that we mentioned, right? So there might be someone who leads with a neurodiverse approach as one of the characters, or a person of colour in a team without other people of colour in there. So what are the layers and textures for those individuals in terms of not only style, but then also recognizing that they have different lived experiences, they have different needs for communication, and how that can start to inform a manager of other things they might need to be tuning into? So it's not only people-centric, but it's also managing across difference to really help make it more robust.

Sarah-Jane: Yeah. And I think that's really important actually, because if you are a female with a drive style in a male-dominated industry, that can be read very differently. So it's allowing you to have that option to see the preference and the behavioural preference, but also to step back and really think about what's the impact of being the only female in this room? How easy is it? And I'm using that because I have had to be that person many a time. How easy is it for that person to be heard? Are we truly listening? Are we mansplaining? You know, all those things can happen. It's having awareness of all of that.

I am not saying that all females, by the way, are in that environment are drivers, because that simply isn't true, but it is allowing you to be able to step back. It's very important to get those value judgments out so you can really explore that really honestly with people. And we often find by this point in a session, people are much more open to having those conversations.

Allen: So we've held up the mirror. Either we have done a live in the room scenario or virtual scenario of a typical meeting where we see those style preferences play out, also recognizing the dynamics of the different diversity elements that could show up in teams in terms of gender demographics, if you will. And also, really worth mentioning that we do this quite a lot in our video work and in our e-learning. It's a really great setup for those kinds of things because you can see individuals through slightly different approach, if it's video led or e-learning led, but you can really kind of hone in on one particular style through their lens. So lots of really different dynamic ways to show this in our approach.

Sarah-Jane: Can I just add into that?

Allen: Oh yeah.

Sarah-Jane: Because one of the things that we do is we have a learning journal. So when people watch the films, for example, you might be watching the scenarios that you've seen live, you'd see them filmed and you're watching those conversations and we ask them to write down what's your unfiltered reaction? Write down what you want. And then you get them to look at and how many of those words are value judgments and what's that telling you. So even though it's not the same as having the discussion in the room, we've found other ways of being able to help people see what's going on.

Allen: Absolutely. So they've seen it through all those good approaches that we've just talked about. And now we want to move into 'Own it'. And we started to pick up on it, right, in terms of what are your personal reflections? What are your reactions to these things? And why is it really important for the participants to Own it in the learning journey for people-centric management, SJ? What's really going on for them in this phase to help them be successful?

Sarah-Jane: Well, this is where they start to discover what's their preference. So in terms of 'Own it', first thing you've got to understand is start with yourself. How do I show up in the world? How do I communicate? The challenge is a broad model. Everybody will tell me that they're in the middle and, oh, I do all of these depending on the situation. And of course, you do. Of course, we all do. And I'm really clear that it's about we all have different amounts of each of these preferences in us. And that's what makes us unique and wonderful individuals. If I've got a group that's particularly resisting, I'll say, apart from standing in the middle, we often have the four corners of the room. And I'm sure the listeners, if they've been on programmes like this, will have had to have gone and stood in one corner, either amiable, expressive, driver, analytical, or whatever the model is. And you go and stand in your corner. But before I do that, I get people to go, just plot where you think you would be. And that's where you see that we are all very different.

And as I say, I will take away the middle spot because I would challenge anyone that thinks they have equal amounts of all of these all of the time. I think we naturally have preferences. And another thing that we often talk about is, it's really about finding where your comfy chair is and who's more naturally you. And we often talk about different, thinking of the four different areas in the room being like different rooms in the house. We've all got different rooms in the house, but there's no good me going to the bathroom if I want to do some cooking. Which one of these just is naturally more you? So we help people do that.

Sometimes with some people, I have been known to say, nope, that's not you, I want you to go over here. But often what happens and why I prefer this approach is that we explore it together because people will have chosen to go to a particular preference for a reason. They'll have got some good thoughts behind that. So why I like that though is either they self-select and go, oh my goodness, I don't think like this at all here. Because what we then get them to do is think about why you're in that corner or how you see the world and all those kinds of things. I don't think like that at all, so they'll move.

Or sometimes to much fun and hilarity, the group will go, you are not one of us, get over there and they will make them go. And I find all of that really interesting. And actually what we do from the scenarios and the hot seat and the reactions to all of that that you've seen in the morning, we're going, you know when you said that person really did your head in, what's that telling you about where your main preference is and why?

So in terms of 'Own it', we really help them explore what that model means to them before they start to think about their teams or broader diversity in their eyes as well. So it allows you to really start with yourself.

Allen: So from the learner's perspective, you're owning where you're at, knowing that there's a spectrum, you're getting to see your other colleagues and where they're at. And that's really crucial for the journey because we're going to move into 'Change it' in just a moment. If you can know where your teams are sort of at, then you'll know how to meet them where they're at. And that's the really important part of the 'Change it' piece that we're going to unpack here in just a moment.

Sarah-Jane: What we're doing in that 'Own it' space and when people are in those different corners, those areas of the room, is also getting people to think through and self-select how the different preferences show up in the world. Because as human beings, we do not come with a questionnaire that you fill in and say, oh, my preference is this, or my preference is that. We show up as we are with our words, body language, energy, attitude, and all of that can link to clues around our preference.

The reason I mentioned that is because as a people-centric manager who's leading diverse teams, you are constantly thinking in terms of to get the most and support people and motivate people. I nearly said the most out of people. That sounded like I'm just working them to death. I don't mean it that way. But I mean that making people feel valued, what you're constantly doing is thinking about flexing to that style. And sometimes that will happen organically and really well. Not with everyone, not with all times, not in all situations. And that's where I think this really helps you start to think about, well, what do I need to change in my behaviours to flex more towards that person?

And so the 'Change it' here, and this goes right back to what I said at the beginning around the difference between we know all of this, but how do you actually do it?

Allen: Okay, that's really helpful for 'Own it'. Now let's move into the 'Change it' phase. What is going on for participants in terms of the learning journey when we move into 'Change it'?

Sarah-Jane: So the 'Change it' here is we give people the opportunity to practice and try out skills practice around, if I'm to rerun some of the conversations that we saw in the earlier scenarios, how can we get a better outcome? And how do I then adapt my style to meet the needs of other different preferences in a way that's natural to me? We're not robots. We've got to find a way that naturally works for us. And it's that bit that really clicks for people.

When I evaluate programs or when I have evaluated programs on this in the past, it's that that gets people going, ah, but I knew how to do it because we practised it and I knew that they needed me to do this, this, this, this, this. So rather than just reading the words, be clear, direct to the point. They've actually practised it in their own way. That becomes very transformative for a lot of leaders and a lot of people.

Allen: And what I love about, again, to paint that picture of the exercise in terms of 'Change it', so part of the connecting the dots to the theory, to the behaviour, that gap we're talking about is we will give more examples of what are the qualities of a driver, but then also what are the things that allow you to more effectively communicate with a driver? So the types of approaches, if you will, and that will happen for each of the different styles, right. So you're not only getting a sense from a theoretical level of the behavioural qualities, but then also what can I do as an individual to try and meet them where they're at?

Sarah-Jane: Yeah, you're absolutely right. Have you really understood what the person is asking you? And are you dismissing? Is there anything in your tone, your body language, the words you're using that they're reading is dismissive? So you're right, it does help have a more effective conversation.

Allen: And also going back to video or e-learning content, you can get your cohort together, and I think you can probably explain this better than I can, SJ, but you can get a cohort of learners together to watch scenarios play out and then do a bit of a goggle box approach. You want to expand on that a little bit more for the listeners?

Sarah-Jane: Yeah. Well, I think listeners in the UK are very used to goggle box on our televisions, which is where you watch people watching television. So what we do is have a group, a cohort, watch a scenario and then give their responses to it. So as a self-led learner, hearing and what's supporting your learning is you're hearing the wisdom of others in the room, if you like, the filmed room, sharing how they would do things differently.

Allen: I also love with video, and this will help us start to move into the final phase, the 'Live it', where you can have voiceover of what's going on in the character's heads, right. So that value judgment piece that you were talking about earlier, right. So you can have driver manager speaking to an analytical team member and then going like, oh gosh, do I have to really repeat all the data over and over again? Okay. And so there's a little bit of humanity involved, but actually we can then point out and go, hold on, you're moving into this value judgment. So you're putting up barriers, how do you shift that and start to reduce those things? So really important, yeah. Right.

So they've seen it. We've seen the different styles play out through various different approaches. They've owned it. They recognize where they're at on the spectrum and kind of where their mindset is towards the other styles and approaches. They've started to Change it through different types of skills-based practice or video-led exercises. And now the most important part is really to go out and live this stuff. So for you, SJ, what are the kind of key success activities to help organizations and individuals really Live it when we think about people-centric management?

Sarah-Jane: Organizations that I've worked with that have really had success in terms of improving communication internally in teams or even their customer service and thinking about adapting to the needs of a customer are ones that have gone back and talked about it, communicated, learned from it. And you may remember I said at the top of this that part of Gillian Shapiro's advice is around going and asking for feedback. It's the same here. It's how well am I doing? Talk to people if that didn't go so well. Why didn't it go so well? It's setting people up for success.

So if you've been on a learning intervention or an experience, have you as a manager had time to talk to people? Have you spoken to your manager about what learning and support you've taken from it? All that good stuff that we know really does work. As well as, I mean, I've seen this in organizations where people will put on the end of their email styles preference in there as well. So that's their way of telling the outside world their preferred way of communicating.

I mean, one of the things that always comes up on these events is, hang on, if I'm the one that's making all the difference here what about everybody else? But I always say, you find that more you move towards people the more they move, they move towards you.

So, in terms of ‘Live it’, there's so much people can do. I know people put it on agenda items, that they make sure that they rotate in terms of personality preference, who leads meetings to make sure that every voice is being heard, and to think about hearing from more diverse perspectives.

And I think that for me, the ‘Live it’ really goes over to how much that organization and the people within that organization really want to make the difference to be able to work collaboratively and communicate well and effectively together. And that means also when it goes wrong, having that conversation around, hang on a minute, what's going on here? Why is this going? Why is this not working? I feel like I've done all of this, but it's still not working. Tell me more. And that curiosity, that tell me more also helps people open up and share really what's probably more the heart of the problem for them.

Allen: Yeah, I think with a lot of our programming, there is follow-up activities that we can design in collaboration with our clients to continue helping people on the developmental journey. But this particular learning or developmental process, it really takes a lot of autonomy. You've got to put the work in, right? You've really got to bring it to the front of mind as an individual; and as you say, leaders from the organizational perspective, talking about this, leading with it, finding ways to make this whatever model you're using as a shared reference point for helping communication.

Well, SJ, I think that is about all the time we have. This has been a really, really insightful and engaging conversation. So thank you so much for joining us on this episode. We really appreciate it.

And thank you listeners for joining us. 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 your organization 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 next episode where we'll be discussing challenges faced by women in organizations and ways to develop content to support reducing those challenges. Until next time, thank you, and remember, you too can See it, Own it, Change it, and Live it.