

Steps To Change - How do organizations establish and maintain a company's culture? And how can our Steps to Change methodology encourage people to live it?

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 exploring how we design and deliver programming that supports a shared understanding of workplace culture. We'll look at what we mean by the idea of culture and then explore how an experiential approach can support people to truly live the values that create the workplace culture.

I am your host, Allen Liedkie, and I am joined on this episode by Mark Shillibeer. Welcome back, Mark. How are you?

Mark: I'm good, thank you. Thank you for having me back. It's been nearly two years, and I was beginning to wonder whether I'd done something wrong, Allen, you didn't want me anymore.

Allen: No, nothing wrong, Mark. Nothing wrong. Great to have you back. And for the listeners out there who may not know you, tell us a little bit about yourself, who you are, what you do at Steps, and any insight and experience you have with the topic today.

Mark: I'm a director of Steps. I just celebrated my 22nd year anniversary with Steps actually, and I am responsible for developing client relationships, writing programs. But I'm also given the rather fancy title of Director of Digital Quality and Innovation, which is basically a fancy way of saying, are we keeping an eye on the things that we do and the way that we do it to make sure that we're as good as we can be?

Allen: So, Mark, before we get into looking at the topic through the Steps to Change methodology, let's spend a little bit of time in getting a shared reference point for what we mean by the idea of culture. So, what is culture and how do we talk about it with clients and why they might be coming to us to design and deliver programming around culture? It's a pretty broad term. So, yeah, let's start unpacking that so that we can have a shared reference point.

Mark: Okay, so there's a number of different ways of coming at it. The obvious way, I guess, is that an organisation will have a set of values or a mission statement or a desire for how they want to be and live and operate as an organisation. And often that can mean big lofty words pinned to the wall, if you've still got an office, I guess. I don't know where they're kept now if you don't have an office. They're the guiding principles for how we want to operate as an organisation. And that's really important and we'll talk a little bit more about that.

But on a more general level, we talk a lot about how we do things around here, the kind of the way that we say hello, the way that we say goodbye, all of our interactions, the ways in which we operate on a day-to-day basis. We talk a lot about how that is the culture of the organisation. And we explore that a lot in the work that we do in various different programs that are specifically culture and values related or indeed not. And again, we'll explore that a little bit. So, it's the guiding principles, the behaviours, the mindset and expectations that we have for how we want people to be good citizens in our business.

Allen: And I think that's a really key part of our discussion here, just to kind of distil that for a moment. So, in essence, the culture is dictated by our everyday behaviours, as you've mentioned, right? So how do we engage or interact with our teammates? How does the leadership show up? How am I as a manager potentially leading by example for the wider business to really "live the values"? And culture can be this nebulous term and probably be interpreted as many different people as there are in the business, there's probably that many different interpretations, right? So having those kind of core sets of values, those effectively are the guiding stars, the north stars for everybody in the business to lean into so that the large organisations can effectively create a culture that has a shared understanding.

Mark: Absolutely. So all of that. And what's interesting is the question is, we say that we want to be these things, we say that we are these things, but actually, are we living that on a day-to-day basis? Is that real? Is the thing that we want to be what's actually playing out in reality? And often that it's not the case. And a lot of the work that we do is explore the difference between the two and how you can bring them together.

Allen: Absolutely. And yeah, we'll double click into that as we go through the process of how we hold up that mirror and sort of establish, you know, what those behaviours might be, what good could look like in terms of living the values. But before we get into that, what are some of the reasons why clients would come to us to engage in a drama-based approach to establishing culture or exploring culture?

Mark: So, there's a number of different angles to this. It could be that you've got a relatively new organisation, a newly established business. There might have been a merger or an acquisition or a new set of leadership coming into the organisation that want to either change or re-establish that sense of who we are. So, they may be looking for a particular program around that either to, as I say, to create a new set of values or principles and culture or to remind ourselves of what they should be.

Often though, it's not as sort of grand as that. It can literally be that we're running a program around a particular topic. It could be leadership. It could be performance management or customer service or whatever it might be. But we want to be able to first understand and then make sure that we're aligning to those cultural values because they're the things that influence how we want to behave in those particular areas. So it could be that we're doing a learning initiative on a particular area that wants to reference back to that and make sure that we're understanding it and aligning to it.

And one of the reasons why I think that our approach is so impactful is because drama is a really great way of exploring having an exploration of “So what does that actually mean?”, if we're talking about we need to be inclusive or supportive or whatever the term is, what does it actually mean on a practical level to make that live and breathe? And interestingly, it doesn't mean that we all have to be the same. It's about exploring how I can do it in a way that aligns with your way of doing it. Your interpretation of it might be different from mine, but we need to explore how we've come together to make it the best possible place for you to work, for me to work and for the benefit of the business. And that's why drama is a really powerful way of exploring this topic, I think.

Allen: And I love that point about which is why having good conversations around the interpretation of the values that help support the culture within an organisation. We're not all asking people to do it exactly the same way, as you said, right? Or, that that would just be creating an organisation of robots. And that's not what good culture can be, right. We want you to bring your individuality.

Mark: Yeah. And often the starting point for us is the reverse of that. The flip of that is I don't want to be expected to be the same as you, so my interpretation is such that I think it's this. And actually, those two are jarring and that causes us problems. The cracks appear in it, and it all falls down. And that's a lot of the work that we explore, particularly at the beginning.

Allen: Great. Well, that's a really good segue into the Steps to Change methodology. So, we've got that shared understanding now of what we mean by culture, it's the values, it's the principles of an organisation. As we noted, sometimes they're, as you say, painted on the wall so that we can be reminded of them every day. But they are the guiding principles for all the peoples in the organisation to kind of lean into so that they can have a shared understanding of what it means to be a good citizen of the culture in the organisation. So, let's move into Steps to Change now.

So as always, we start with ‘See It’. As we've mentioned on every episode, one of the key principles of ‘See It’ is a really good quality research phase that we would go into because we want to create that bespoke content. And I would say, actually, for programs on culture, it's imperative that it's bespoke content, right? Because we have to really understand what this interpretation of those values are for the organisation we're speaking to.

So, Mark, could you talk a little bit about how we approach the research process under the umbrella of cultural programming and how that can impact the ‘See It’ phase for success?

Mark: The research phase is the part where we talk to a number of people within the organisation to understand what it's like for you in your day-to-day interactions; language, the terminology, what it's like to be you in your role within that organisation. And actually, the starting point for our research is the same, whatever the topic area. One of the first questions I tend to ask is, what's the culture like here? What's the dynamic? Is it fast paced? Is it stressful? Is it low key and relaxed or whatever it might be. And it's a really useful way of getting a temperature check of that particular organisation and to

understand whether those values are being lived in a way that might either support or hinder the culture that they want. So that's a starting point in any program because that tells you a little bit about where they're at and the issues that they might have in the journey that they've got to go on.

And a really simple, in some ways obvious, but example that I come across time and time again is we say that we want to be like X, but actually we're so busy, it's so relentless that it can't possibly be like that because we don't have time to even stop and think about it. So, you get that sense and you're exactly right. You might hear different interpretations of that from the leadership, from those that are on the ground trying to make it happen. So, the research piece, we always talk about holding a mirror up to the behaviours as they're currently manifest in the organisation, and to be able to hear those stories and that sense of language and the words people use and the way that they describe it is really important.

And so that can then inform the drama in a number of different ways, right. So, the obvious way is to show the not so good examples of that playing out in practice. So, I want to be a leader who's doing X, but actually the way that I operate because of all the things we talked about, because the environment and the nature of how things are at the moment means I'm not living that in the way that I would ideally like. So, we play that out and say, well, if that's how things are now, where do we go with this and how do we improve things?

And the other way that we do it is a kind of living the value as an excuse to hide behind, if that makes sense? So, I'm consciously aware of what it is that we should be, and I state that, and I talk about that in my conversations with people. But actually, what I'm demonstrating is not aligning with that value. And that's a really interesting dynamic because someone might consciously think that they are doing it, but actually in practice, they're not. So, what do you do with that? You explore how you challenge that behaviour and feedback to that behaviour and sort of move on from there.

Allen: I think something also that happens in 'See It' with culture programming is with some sessions that we've delivered with clients, they want a mixed group of people. So, let's get the leadership in with the sort of boots on the ground team or lack of a better term. And it's probably the first time where the leadership are realising that these types of values aren't being lived or they're hearing for the first time through the drama that the people don't think the leadership are living those values because most individual contributors aren't going to go up to a leader and say, you say a lot, but you don't actually live it. So, it's a kind of an eye opener in a non-kind of pointed finger way for us to kind of surface the fact that maybe these values are just kind of just living on the wall and not living through everyday behaviours through everyone.

Mark: Yeah, 100%. And it's an opportunity to show some of those moments that we talked about from the research where those things are just not quite aligning. And it gives you an opportunity to see that actually other people don't see it the way that you do. And again, what comes out of that is a case of I now understand. So, what on earth do we do with this? And that's that sort of leads us on from there.

Allen: Yeah, absolutely. So, the great thing about holding up the mirror in that way is we are showing maybe the misinterpretation of the values or where opportunities aren't being leaned into to support those values that disconnect maybe between leadership and the wider teams. So, we're getting that shared understanding that there is something that we need to work together to kind of improve upon. And we're getting that visceral connection, as we always say, because that's where you're going to get the best engagement. People are going, okay, yeah, I recognize these behaviours. I want to do something different.

So that moves us very nicely into the next stage of the steps to change methodology, which is 'own it'. So, what's happening for participants after the 'See It' phase as we move into 'Own It' to support their learning journey for culture?

Mark: So 'Own It' is the bit where individuals explore and are challenged to understand the part that they play either individually, but also collectively in being able to do something different as a result of that understanding that they've now been brought to. Now, avid listeners of your podcast will remember from the first session that we did on the Steps to Change journey is, if you remember, I said that all four stages of Steps to Change are the most important. But actually, in many ways, this is the most important because the drama in holding that mirror up is engaging.

And as we'll come on to, there are bits that we can do to learn and gather skills and practice how to do things differently and try to make that live moving forward once we've got that understanding.

But at the heart of it is this, right? So, let's put it from this point of view, let's start here. Most of us don't set out to be evil or to do bad in our day to day working lives, right. We come to work, we try and do our best. But actually, if we don't hold on to and own this notion that I am responsible for helping change things for myself and for others around me, then no amount of exploration and learning as to what can be done differently will make any difference. We have to buy into the idea that I have a part to play in doing things differently. So, the 'Own It' phase is exploring what that means and challenging people to hold on to it and act accordingly. Does that make sense?

Allen: Yes. So, my interpretation of what you said is I might not necessarily have the same view as you, Mark, in terms of what good practice is through the lens of whatever value it is that we're discussing. And in fact, I might have a personal belief that is not congruent with those values that are on the wall, right, that are going to support our culture. However, to be a good citizen within this organisation, I need to understand that, own the fact of where I'm at in terms of my viewpoint on that, my belief system on that, but also that there is a requirement for me within the business to lean into this, because collectively we all need to play our part to make sure we're doing our best to support that culture.

Mark: Yeah. And then when you talk about requirements, obviously that's easier to position if you're a leader, right. If you're a manager, there is a responsibility for you to own the need to help people understand what they might need to do differently or understand what it is that we're asking them to

align to, etc. But as you've said, the work that we do also challenges the thinking of any individual to say, you know, what part do you want to play in that to be a good citizen? We talk about the kind of the moral case for helping others be the best that they can be as well as yourself. And you can't make anyone do anything in this situation.

And we'll talk about the power of drama in this. All you can do is appeal to people to say, shall we go collectively on this journey together? And it will impact on different people in different ways. It might be that someone says, actually, I now realise that what's being asked of me in the culture of this business, the way that we want to be in the way that we want to operate isn't actually for me. So, it could be helpful in that regard. And we shouldn't be frightened of that. But mostly it's about sort of understanding often very small things that I can do differently to play my part. That's what we talk about with the 'Own It' piece.

Allen: So, you were talking about the power of drama there. You want to drill down a little bit more into that for us? Like how in the 'Own It' phase can we use drama to kind of surface these points that we're talking about?

Mark: There's a couple of ways that we do this. So, one of the best ways is to talk directly to the characters, what we call 'hot seating'. And having seen a situation where behaviours and things are not going quite as they should be, we encourage the participants to explore that directly with the characters. And you might speak to a manager who hadn't realised that they were behaving in a certain way and may seek to justify their position, not necessarily negatively. It might just be, well, I didn't realise, but I'm working 100 miles an hour, I don't have time to think about these things or whatever it might be. So, you get the chance to challenge people who are effectively reflective of either that individual themselves or those around them, right. Because obviously we've done that on the basis of the research. So, it's a really good way of understanding that these things are not black and white and starting to challenge that behaviour, starting to unpick it and analyse ways in which we can better understand it so that we can do things differently.

And then another really powerful way is to hear from an individual who is not experiencing the working relationships in the way that they would ideally like. So, my boss is actually great. My boss, I often really enjoy working with him or her. But when he does this, it makes me feel like that. And what I really want is this to happen or that to happen or this help to be given to me so that I can be the best that I can be. And to hear that presented back to you in that way through drama is a really powerful way of getting people to understand that there are other perspectives other than their own. Better understand those perspectives.

And then again, we can then talk about, okay, so now you've got that understanding, what do we do with it? Well, actually, even before that. So now we've got that understanding. Now, do you care? Do you want to own the responsibility to do this? And if you do, we can work together to see where we go with it.

Allen: Yeah, most important in this whole process is how can we springboard into conversation about, well, what is it like for you around here? What are your viewpoints? Where do we disagree? So, as you say, that real power of 'Own It' is to go, okay, well, where am I at in my viewpoint on this? And now do I care enough to actually lean into changing things? And that that helps us move over into the next phase of the steps to change methodology, and that's 'Change It'. So, the participants have seen it...

Mark: The most important phase.

Allen: Most important phase, right, that's debatable until the cows come home, right. So, we've the participants have seen it holding up that mirror. They've owned it in terms of that healthy discussion and reflection of what's it really like for us as individuals and as a team around here. But then we want to really help build on where they're at in terms of that ownership to change things. So, what can we do differently to support our collective goals, our individual development needs to really support the culture getting to the place where we want it to be? So, talk us a little bit through kind of things that take place within 'Change It' to help that process, Mark.

Mark: Yeah, sure. So, the first thing to say is a reminder to people that in our experience over the years, what we found is that most organisations identify they have an issue. So, in this particular case, we want to build or re-establish our sense of culture. And what organisations typically do is some of the things that we're just going to go on to describe now in the 'Change It'. So, we're going to make sure that we're clear about the definitions and ways in which we can interpret different values or whatever it might be. And then they say, so if you go and now make the culture happen and they get very frustrated by the fact that nothing changes as a result. So that's a reaffirmation of all the of the two phases that we've talked about before we get here.

But when we do get here, this is about exploring the theories, the techniques, the learning that can help us in preparation for doing things differently when we get back into the workplace. So, there are a number of different things. It could be that we do, as I've just sort of alluded to, we could take a deeper dive into each of the strands of the values, if that's what we're focusing on and understanding how they connect to the ethos and culture of the organisation that we want. It could be that we're exploring how various elements are brought to life in the situations that we face. So that's sort of the opposite to the bad that we explored in in the earlier scenario. What do I mean by that? So, it's like let's play out a situation and work together to build the vocabulary of support and challenge that might need to come when things are not working as they should be.

And you can't underestimate the power of just taking the time to work together to explore what some of that language might be. And that's the interactive forum theatre techniques that we often use in our sessions. It could be skills practice. It could be small groups or one to one practice where I kind of now focus on the areas that I struggle with and the things that I'm particularly finding as a blocker at the moment and just giving people the opportunity to play that out in a safe environment.

So it's all of those things that enable you to have the skills, have the theoretical support, the knowledge that you need, and as I say, practice so that when we go back together, all of that's come together and I can now start making that happen.

Allen: I think one of the powerful things around 'change it', participants own the fact that maybe they need to be doing something different, right, they need to develop their skills for whatever the value is that they're kind of exploring at the moment where they feel like they're lacking. Let's say if one of the values is we are an inclusive organisation, right. So, people might go, oh, yeah, well, I'm inclusive. I feel like everybody should be included and I think I'm doing great there. But then when you ask people, okay, well, what are you doing behaviourally every day to support inclusion? How does that show up for you? Then that's where the knowledge gap can typically show up for people because they might not necessarily have all the vocabulary understanding to articulate what it is that they're doing that supports that inclusion.

So, they probably are doing it. But what we want to do is help them surface that shared terminology that really supports the actions that create that culture of inclusion.

Mark: One of the important points here is that we can refer back to the company's own definition because they will have spent time saying, we want to be an inclusive organisation, which means this for us. And that's where we can refer back to that to remind ourselves of what it is and to say, so what does that actually mean in practice? Let's explore that. Let's play that out. And that's what we mean by the kind of the 'Change It' bit is about changing your understanding of what's possible and practising that and living it.

Allen: And I think one of the things to reflect upon at this stage of the Steps to Change methodology is for some people, clients and participants, they want to go, oh, well, just tell me the things I need to do to live this value. Give me the checklist, if you will. But actually, that would probably be not helpful because going back to what we were talking about at the overview, we want people to be able to show up as themselves and bring their version of this however it needs to manifest. So, it can be potentially initially unsatisfying because people are going, oh, you know, well, just tell me what to do or how to say it. And sure, there can be some learning of giving some guidelines and principles. But what we want to avoid is, you know, people walking away with, okay, I've got my inclusion checklist. I've got my support values checklist because in some way that that's not going to help because it's going to turn people into doing everything the same way.

Mark: And what's really interesting about the technique when it comes to looking at something like the culture of an organisation is that we can explore different ways and different interpretations that people have because we don't necessarily all have to have the same window on the world, right? So, what we might do is take a piece of advice. Give me the words, tell me what it is that as a leader I need to try and say in this situation. I'll try it out. And it may or may not be successful, even if it is successful.

Someone else will say, but hold on a second, I would never say it like that. I would want to say it like this because for me, that's the right kind of way into it. And what you get from that is an understanding that we don't all have to be the same. We'd have to be the robots, as you said earlier on, Allen. And at the same time, we can still learn that there are different ways of doing it than what I thought when I set out on this journey. And it's a really powerful way of exploring what good can look like.

Allen: Okay, Mark. So, I think that's a really good exploration of the 'Change It' piece, right. We're using interactive drama-based scenario learning where we're coaching a character to try out different ways of living that value and seeing what works and maybe what doesn't work so well. We're giving people a sense of where is the effort for them to develop the soft skills or the language that they need to really bring those values to life. And I think what's really crucial about this stage of 'Change It' as we move into 'Live It' is we want to give them practical connections to the linking these back to their specific roles. So, they've got to have something to hang the hooks on. So as individual contributor, this is what inclusion is expected of you or as a manager, as a leader, so that they have something to kind of work towards in terms of that development. So, it's not just a conversation in a vacuum.

So, they're starting to develop those skills in the room and now we're asking them to go out and 'Live It'. So that's the final stage of the Steps to Change methodology. How do we support the learners and organisations to take what they've learned in a session back into the workplace and really live it? Because as we said at the very top of this, culture is the behaviours that we live. So really, this is absolutely necessary in this process to make it effective.

Mark: Yeah, absolutely. So, the fourth of the most important stages of Steps to Change, as you say, is 'Live It', because actually it doesn't matter how good a session's been or a learning intervention or a series of learning interventions. It depends on what we're doing with the client. And if nothing changes, then what's the point, right? So, you're absolutely right. It's about creating an environment for people to be able to do things differently.

And so, there's a couple of different ways that we support that journey, if you like. One is by enabling people to continue to practice. So, whether it's skills practice with us, action learning groups, people getting together to share experience and keep the conversation going, talking about what's working well and what they're still struggling with. It's about having a mindset to continue to learn. That's one part of it. And we can play a role in that. We can support an organisation to do that for themselves. And often we encourage people to self-facilitate their way into that as well.

The other side of that is to work with the organisation to have everything in place to enable people to succeed. So, some examples of that might be the creation of culture champions. So, people who have stood up and said that they're willing to take responsibility for helping people and being a point of contact or a liaison between the individuals in the organisation to explore problems or whatever it might

be. So, people who are representing the need and have stood up to say that they're happy to be that reference point.

But it's also things as simple as, you know, building the reference points of the culture that we want or the values that we want within our performance management system and our appraisals. We have that at Steps. We have a whole section which is about how well are we living the values that we said that we want to live in our projects and our day-to-day interactions. So, yeah, it's about how we performance manage people and the systems and processes that support us to do that so that it is continually lived onboarding as part of an induction. This is our culture. This is who we want to be. What do we mean by that? This is a person you can go to and buddy with so that you can understand that in more detail.

Allen: Well, as part of that onboarding piece, trying to link that back to an experiential learning approach, I think some of the ways we've been successful is to work with leadership around making sure that they're all clear on what the values means to live and that they're understanding the things that they can do to show up, and then going away and creating e-learning resources or video-led resources that can sit on their LMS so that when they have a whole new batch of individuals come in, they can take them through, it's part of that onboarding process, right? So, it's continuing the use of that See It, Own It, Change It, Live It process through the different approaches that we can have so that people are starting on a similar path together.

Mark: Yeah, absolutely. And it's about continually having a temperature check of where we're at on the journey because we're not going to get there straight away and interestingly, what you said right at the top end is that it's not going to stay static either, it's always going to be moving. So, we just need to keep checking in, where are we in relation to where we want to be and what do we need to do. That's a forever thing.

It's going back to that whole kind of idea of why are we even doing this? We do it because we know that you're supposed to do it, other organizations do it. But actually, we're doing it because it guides us on a day-to-day basis and enabling us to do what it is that we do as a business, but also enjoy the journey and get the best out of each of us. And that may change over time. It might mean that we need a different set of values. But it's about constantly looking at it as a way of supporting us and doing the good that we do.

Allen: Absolutely. Well, Mark, this has been a wonderful conversation. Thanks again for coming back and joining us, even if it took us almost two years to get you back, but it was well worth it. So that's about all the time we have left for this episode.

Mark: See you in two years, Allen. Yeah.

Allen: Absolutely. And thank you listeners for joining on this episode. If you'd like to know more about Steps and Steps to Change, make sure you visit our website, find us on LinkedIn, sign up to our

newsletter. All of those links will be available in the show notes.

If you're interested in how Steps could partner with you or your organization to support your needs, you can send us an email or fill in 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'm your host, Allen Liedkie, and we look forward to you tuning into the next episode where we'll be discussing how we use our methodology to support resilience management in individuals and in the workplace. Until next time, thank you, and remember you too can see it, own it, change it, and live it.