

BLACK HISTORY, BLACK FUTURES WITH PAUL DAVIS AND ROB DAVIS

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McMillan LLP is pleased to present our podcast series “Black History, Black Futures,” which will be released throughout February as part of our Black History Month commemoration. Each episode will feature an interview with a McMillan lawyer and a trailblazing Black leader in Canada’s business world.

In this episode, [Paul Davis](#), Partner in our Capital Markets & Securities and Mergers & Acquisitions groups and Chair of the Board of Partners, speaks with his brother Rob Davis, Chair of the Board of Directors and Tax Partner of KPMG Canada, on his career journey and the path to improving representation in Canada’s boardrooms.

Transcript

Paul Davis: Hello and welcome to McMillan's Black History Month podcast. As one of Canada's leading business law firms, we value diversity, inclusion and equity, and they're integral to our culture and our commitment to providing exceptional service to our clients. This podcast series will feature interviews with trailblazing black leaders who have made a significant impact in their respective fields. Join us as we listen to these leaders, share their stories and reflect on their journey to success.

My name is Paul Davis and I'm the leader of our Capital Markets & Securities and Mergers & Acquisitions Groups, and I'm also the Chair of the Board of Partners. Joining me today for our first episode is somebody very special, Robert Davis. Rob is a tax partner with KPMG and a true leader in his field. And, to top it off, he's my

younger brother. I'm obviously thrilled that he can join me.

Rob Davis: Thanks very much, Paul, pleasure to be here.

Paul Davis: First question, not a tough one. Can you briefly describe your various roles at KPMG and what you find most rewarding?

Rob Davis: So right now, I've got three roles at KPMG, actually, at least for the next few months. First and foremost, I am a Tax Partner and focused on transfer pricing. Those of you that don't know what transfer pricing is, it's basically dealing with companies that do business in more than one country and transactions with each other. So, that's been the focus of my life for the last 17 years or so.

Also, a couple of years ago I took on the role of Chief Inclusion, Diversity and Equity Officer. In that role, my sole purpose is to really further a lot of the efforts that we've made over the last number of years in terms of building a culture that's inclusive and making sure that everybody feels comfortable bringing their whole self to work. Then the last couple of years, I've been Chair of our Board.

I joined our Board in 2017. I was elected Deputy Chair in 2020 and then elected Chair in 2021. In that role, I am focused on stewardship and governance. I work closely with our CEO, and I've got a seat at the table at our management committee for all their meetings. My voice from an ID&E perspective is pretty loud. So very, very proud of what we've accomplished over the last number of years.

Paul Davis: Can you talk about your career path?

Rob Davis: There's an old Beatles song, The Long and Winding Road.

Paul Davis: Didn't know you're a Beatles fan.

Rob Davis: That sort of summarizes my career, actually. I'll try to be brief, but it's tough. So I started with KPMG almost 34 years ago, graduated from University of Toronto, got my CA, recognized pretty early on that audit was not for me. My brain just wasn't wired. Nothing against our auditors at all. That's obviously a great profession, but I learned pretty early on that taxes sort of what make me tick.

So joined our tax group shortly after I qualified, spent a couple of years in our international tax group, sort of the technical resource for the Canadian firm. Lucky enough to spend four months in Amsterdam at KPMG International on that secondment there, came back and spent a bunch of years in our software technology practice. This is the late nineties, the tech industry was a boom. Software technology companies were lots of cash and did lots of interesting work for them.

Bit of a turning point in 1999 actually, where I was at KPMG, all the partners said "Rob, you've got the stuff that

it takes to be a partner. But when I looked up, not a very diverse partnership. Very few women and certainly no black partners, and very few people of colour as well. So decided at that point, because I didn't have any role models really, that I could emulate to get to that next level, decided at that point to leave the firm. I spent about six years in industry, recognized I get bored pretty quickly because in those six years I was with four different companies. So not that I can't keep a job, I just get bored. Bored very, very quickly.

Decided to come back to the firm in 2005. At that point saw a bit more diversity, but also saw a path to partnership in a new emerging area at the time called transfer pricing and then made full partner in 2008. Always had a bent for people, so was HR Partner for our tax group and GTA for a number of years. I was on the executive ID&E council that we formed back in 2014, so always focused on our people.

I put my hand up for the Board back in 2005. No, sorry, but 2015 I guess, and then joined the Board in 2017. And then as I said, sort of been on the Board since then and now serve as Board Chair. So it's been a long road, and I actually don't regret any of the moves that I made. Arguably, I could have attained a more senior role sooner, but I don't regret any of the roles that I've had over my career.

Paul Davis: Now, I always tell people that to be successful, you need a mentor. I haven't met somebody who is successful, who hasn't had a great mentor. So, have you had any black mentors? Have they shaped your career or just talking about mentors generally?

Rob Davis: Well, your question was black mentors and unfortunately, the quick answer there is no, because there's just not a lot of representation. Now it's getting better, but certainly when I was starting out, there weren't folks that look like me that I could emulate, which as I said, that's part of the reason why I decided to leave the firm back in 1999.

As you said, mentors are critical. Sponsors are even more critical. I was lucky enough, frankly, very early in my career to get some really good mentors and mentors that sought me out. I probably should've done a better job of trying to seek out mentors, but I was lucky enough to have lots of mentors over the years who sort of showed me the ropes, provided opportunities for me. And then most importantly, I think some of those mentors turned into sponsors who literally opened doors for me, pounded the table for me. For example, when I was up for partner, if it wasn't for a couple of very strong sponsors, I might not have made it, right. So having, strong mentors and more importantly, strong sponsors who will actually be your voice when you're not at the table is critically important.

Paul Davis: So obviously, I know KPMG and you are focused on this, but when you look at representation of people of colour, particularly black people in the industry, thoughts?

Rob Davis: It's getting better. When I started out, it was pretty lonely, frankly. But still today, often I'm the only

black person in the meeting room, especially at this at this level. So it's getting better, but we still have some work to do. I'll actually bring in a shameless plug for our survey.

KPMG actually surveyed black Canadians a couple of months ago and released our survey last week. It certainly makes me optimistic. In our survey, about 90% of black Canadians that we surveyed, saw progress, thought that their employers were doing a good job to elevate black people, promote, attract, etc. So certainly positive, I think that bodes well. The survey that we did had a breakdown by industry, and certainly in the accounting and sort of financial services consulting, we saw similar results. It's showing progress, but I think it's going to take a while.

If you really think about it, prior to 2020, there's lots of talk, but lots of inaction. Not a lot of stuff happened prior to 2020. Since then, because of conversations like this, frankly, and the focus that it's received, it's certainly gotten better. We can't expect to change the world in a couple of years when it's taken us so long to get to where we are. So I certainly think there's lots of momentum. We got to continue the conversation. I hope and I'm pretty confident, frankly, that in another sort of five, ten years, it'll be a much different conversation that we're having.

Paul Davis: And what do you think are the concrete steps businesses can take to get to that position in five to ten or so years?

Rob Davis: Well, continue talking about it, but more than talk about it, do something about it, right. Education is a big thing. One thing that we started in our firm a few years back is anti-racism training, training on unconscious bias. We all have biases. Even underrepresented groups like ourselves have biases. We need to be able to identify them and check them. That sort of training, that sort of awareness is important.

Paul Davis: Do you think unconscious bias training really works?

Rob Davis: It does. You got to do it much more than once, though, I think. I think it does work. It's interesting, like in the summer of 2020, with the whole George Floyd situation, I've had lots of discussions with folks inside my firm, outside of my firm, about bias. And about how lots of white men, in particular, just didn't really understand what was going on and really had their own biases. It was a lack of awareness, lack of education, lack of knowledge, lack of lived experiences, which I think created some of those biases. I think, folks like us, frankly, having those sorts of conversations help, but tough to eliminate it. I think keeping the discussions ongoing will certainly help.

I mean, in terms of what companies can do specifically to increase representation, not just to black people, but underrepresented groups generally. As you're hiring for especially senior roles, make sure you get a diverse slate of candidates. If you don't, there should be somebody who is challenging that. There's got to be other

people in your pipeline available talent they can look to. So make sure you've got a diverse slate of candidates and obviously choose the best candidate for the role, but start with a diverse slate of candidates. A lot of companies now have black professional groups, sort of employee resource groups, work with them, have a two way conversation, but most importantly, don't leave it to them to implement change. Black people cannot be responsible for elevating black people. So you've got to have allyship and you've got to have two way conversations with your black employees. Those are I think a few things that if companies sort of keep top of mind, will see change soon.

Paul Davis: Last question. What advice would you have given your younger self?

Rob Davis: Patience.

Paul Davis: Not a Davis trait, by the way.

Rob Davis: I mentioned my long and winding road in terms of career. Part of the moves that I made was just lack of patience, just wanting things to move quicker than reality showed. I talked about this a little bit earlier as well in terms of seeking out mentors. Mentors during my career, just happenstance seemed to have sought me out. I think I would have progressed faster if I'd actively sought out mentors. So that's something that I definitely should have told my younger self. Something that I should tell my younger self, but also my current self, is I'm probably my own worst enemy in terms of selling myself short.

Paul Davis: Another Davis trait.

Rob Davis: Even to this day, given everything that I've accomplished, still lack confidence.

Paul Davis: Not just the marketing pizzazz, do you think it's the lack of confidence?

Rob Davis: Lack of confidence and just a lack of recognition as to what I've actually accomplished. Maybe that's just who I am. It's funny, I always tell people I don't like to be at the front of the parade. I'd much rather be somewhere in the middle sort of helping people along, but I don't like being at the front.

Paul Davis: Well, thank you. It's been somewhat self-revealing and illuminating. Thanks, Rob, it was great having you here and good that this is the first of our series for the Black History Month podcasts. I hope people tune in to the other podcasts that are going to come after this. It was great interviewing you. Better me than other members of the Firm.

Rob Davis: Thanks, Paul. Thanks McMillan for organizing this, fantastic series for sure. Thank you