

The Q&A

Jay Rosenzweig



This week I had a chance to chat with lawyer and social impact investor **Jay Rosenzweig**. While Jay's day job is founder of an **executive search firm**, much of his passion lies in helping make the world a better place. For well over 20 years, he's immersed himself in global human rights causes and the fight for gender and racial equality and his internationally acclaimed Annual Rosenzweig Report on equality is now in its 18th year.

DAME: Your philanthropic work focuses on diversity, gender equity, and the fight against racism and antisemitism. But what do you think is the most pressing issue facing Western society today? And where do you think we're at in terms of progress on solving these issues?

Jay Rosenzweig: It is interesting that you frame the question around "Western society". I believe that the most pressing issue for the human race is climate change. We are already seeing the impact of the planet's warming with more intense storms, rising sea levels, and disruption to agricultural production. The individuals likely to be most impacted are the economically disadvantaged, including disproportionately women and minorities. Places like Bangladesh, Chad, Haiti, and the Philippines are experiencing social stress linked to a shift in the climate. Any time you have populations competing for diminished resources, there is the potential for a rise in racism, sectarianism, and scapegoating. Western society, with its technological prowess, its financial resources, and its democratic institutions, is in the best position to tackle climate change. And it can best do so by involving all of its citizens in the effort by fostering diversity and gender equality, and by avoiding falling into the trap of casting blame on others. We are making progress, but it is uneven. While countries like Canada and Norway make measurable progress on gender equality, we also see what is going on in places like Iran and Afghanistan. There is also the example of Russia, which has denied its own population the right to protest an illegal invasion, while committing war crimes in Ukraine and abducting Ukrainian children. Despite all of these setbacks, I do believe we will achieve a more inclusive future. But it takes effort and sustained commitment.

Human rights are a global issue but they should feel local and personal to all of us. What do you think are some of the challenges to getting individuals and business leaders to understand the urgency in working on the issue together?

Most of us tend to focus on things that need immediate attention or are right in front of us —our families, our job, our community. It is a challenge to get individuals to see the bigger picture. That's where organizations like the Raoul Wallenberg Centre For Human Rights and publications like DAME can play such an important role. Getting the attention of opinion leaders, including

CEO's and policy makers, is critical. You also need to frame issues in a way that is meaningful to them. That is why, 18 years ago, I began charting the presence of women in corporate Canada's most senior positions. More recently, we have broken this out further to include women of color. There have been studies, carried out by Harvard and other institutions, that have quantified the bottom-line advantage of having greater diversity of thought in the executive suite. These are the kinds of things that capture the attention of senior executives.

It's easy, if not warranted, to expect corporations and somewhat untouchable leaders to not invest in fixing systemic problems that in many ways benefit them. What has surprised you most about those who actually do? And how can their progress be replicated across industries and the C-Suite?

One of the challenges in getting corporations and their leaders focused on fixing systemic problems is the quarterly time-horizon within which publicly traded companies operate. There is a reluctance to initiate change unless the financial benefits are immediate, which is often unrealistic. But there are companies that benefit from taking a longer view. A good example is Medtronic, the \$32-billion healthcare technology company led by CEO Geoff Martha. They recently earned a Catalyst Award for accelerating and advocating the progress of women in the workplace. Over the last several years Medtronic has taken a proactive approach to closing the gender gap through promotion, mentorship, and support for female employees. In 2020 Medtronic actually achieved 99% pay equity globally. This has enhanced the company's reputation as a great place to work and as a destination for young job seekers. What surprises me is that more CEOs and companies don't replicate this model.

One of the things that makes me so proud at DAME is our high percentage of male readers (and supporting members). It's really a strong reminder of how critical male allyship is in the fight for gender equity and equality. You're an incredible champion of women's causes, tell us a little bit about what inspires that work and what you'd advise men on how they could be better allies?

First and foremost, I am inspired by the women in my life, my wonderful partner Renee and our brilliant daughters Sammy and Ali. But I am also inspired by the stories of courageous women like Iranian human rights activist Nasin Sotoudeh, individuals who put their lives on the line every day in the struggle for freedom. I would advise men that their voices are important and their support is not just welcome, but critical. This can include things like mentoring and modeling inclusive behavior within their own organizations. Take former Canadian Attorney General and Minister of Justice Irwin Cotler, my law professor at McGill and the Founder of the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights. He has always acted as a strong ally of women and their rights. When in parliament, he was the first man on the women's caucus and he transformed our Supreme Court into the most gender representative in the world at the time. These things inspired me. Men can be better allies by truly listening when women highlight the obstacles they face in their careers and in society at large. Action starts with understanding.

What's something that's bringing you joy right now?

My greatest joy is time with family. Between my philanthropic interests and my business activities, I keep a pretty hectic schedule. But I am very disciplined about setting aside significant time with my wife, my son, and my daughters. Humanitarianism starts at home.