

Mackinac Policy Conference: Closing the opportunity gap

Written by Kurt Brauer

This conference is an opportunity to reflect on the state's strengths (and capitalize on them) and assess our weaknesses (and come up with innovative solutions) in order to move Michigan forward.”



Robert L. Johnson, courtesy of Detroit Chamber

Robert L. Johnson, founder and chairman of The RLJ Companies and Black Entertainment Television, delivered today's second keynote address, which focused on engaging men and women of color to become part of the economic engine of the United States.

He knows whereof he speaks. A successful media magnate, Johnson launched BET in 1980 as the first cable network aimed at African-Americans. It became the first black-controlled company to be listed on the

New York Stock Exchange, and Johnson parlayed that into several related channels before selling it to Viacom – a deal that made him America's first African-American billionaire.

Over-regulation, he told his listeners, does not benefit the entrepreneurial spirit. In fact, it often gets in the way of progress, particularly for African-Americans and other minority groups. He said that starting BET was the result of continuous improvement and investment from the private sector, as well as a lot of personal sweat equity. Chance favors the prepared mind, he noted, and he met John Malone, who gave him a chance to work hard for himself, rather than for somebody else.

Johnson noted that the opportunity gap between black Americans and white Americans has grown for more than 50 years and continues to widen, whether measured by wealth, income or unemployment. Closing the gap

without depending on regulatory intervention will require willingness on the part of businesses to reach out to minority communities to give them the opportunity to compete on the same footing, he said.

A case in point is the RLJ Rule: Before you hire at a director level or above, interview at least two qualified minority candidates.

The successful integration of minority communities starts with simply providing the opportunity, rather than mandating or legislating set-asides, to begin filling the pipeline with qualified candidates.

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