

The Washington Post

Minority business chiefs call on firms to do more to close racial gaps

By Michael A. Fletcher, Updated: Thursday, May 16, 9:39 AM

An influential group of black and Hispanic business leaders is calling on the nation's leading corporations to agree to interview black and Hispanic candidates before filling every top job and board position.

The group of 30 executives and corporate board members met at the W Hotel in Washington on Wednesday at the behest of African American businessman Robert L. Johnson, who has been pushing for President Obama to address the yawning employment gap that has long separated white workers from black and Hispanic workers.



(Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images) - Robert L. Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET), renewed his call for President Obama to address the gaping employment gap that has long separated black and white workers.

Johnson, chairman of the RLJ Cos. and founder of Black Entertainment Television, said the gap could be narrowed if Obama used the bully pulpit to encourage U.S. corporations to voluntarily embrace a plan to interview at least two qualified black or Hispanic candidates for every job at the vice president level or higher. He said companies should also interview two minority-owned firms for vendor supply and other contracts.

The suggestion is based on the National Football League's Rooney Rule, which requires teams to interview minority candidates seeking head coaching or general manager jobs before making hiring decisions. That measure is credited with helping to increase the number of black NFL head coaches and front-office executives.

Johnson said the group laid the plan out to Obama at a White House meeting more than a year ago. But although the president said it was a good idea, Johnson said, the White House has not acted on it.

Frustrated with the administration's lack of action, Johnson and other minority business leaders are taking the demand to corporate America. Speaking after Wednesday's meeting, Johnson said the group agreed to send letters Thursday to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, both of which represent some of the nation's largest companies.

The executives and corporate board chieftains who attended the meeting said the proposed policy would not only help address long-standing racial employment and wealth disparities, but would also make good business sense because it would help firms better position themselves to sell their goods and services to ever-diversifying markets.

“We need people who have diverse backgrounds and experiences to add to the populations of executives and corporate board members,” said Luis Ramirez, president and chief executive of Global Power, a energy design and manufacturing firm.

Johnson said he was disappointed that Obama has not done much to move his idea. “I can tell you from my standpoint, he could do more,” Johnson said.

Participants in the meeting said they are no longer looking to government leaders to push the proposal.

“I don’t think the government needs to be involved. Did the government get involved in the Rooney Rule?” asked Lu Cordova, chief executive of Corlund Industries, an investment holding company. “A rule like this makes executives think. And when they think, minorities get hired. So, what we are doing is asking companies to think before they do procurement and to think before they do hiring.”