



# Allyship and Inclusion in an Entrepreneurship Ecosystem

THOUGHTS ON CHANGE CATALYST'S  
FIRESTARTER TALK ON ALLYSHIP



DIVERSITY



EQUITY



INCLUSION

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*The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation asked over a dozen ecosystem builders to watch, recap, and share their thinking on the Firestarter talks from the past three ESHIP Summits. This article is part of a series that supports the Kauffman Foundation's ongoing efforts to grow entrepreneurship and explore new models of economic development by elevating the work of ecosystem builders.*

*These talks were intended to inspire conversation and drive engagement in key themes in the field of entrepreneurial ecosystem building.*

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## Summary

Melinda Epler and Wayne Sutton are the co-founders of Change Catalyst, an organization that builds inclusive tech ecosystems through strategic advising, startup programs, and resources, and a series of events around the globe. At the 2018 ESHIP Summit, Epler and Sutton teamed up to talk about allyship and inclusion in entrepreneurial ecosystem building. The talk covered leading with and maximizing empathy, challenges faced by underrepresented entrepreneurs, and ways we can help.

### **Creating and running a truly inclusive innovation ecosystem does not come without deep work and intention.**

In fact, experience has shown that there is no backdoor means or a shortcut to building one locally. During their 2018 ESHIP Summit Firestarter, Melinda and Wayne talk about centering our work around allyship inclusion.

Allyship is understanding the imbalance in opportunity in our entrepreneurship ecosystem and putting significant efforts into changing it. The allyship foundation involves both underrepresented entrepreneurs and founders, implying that both parties must be aware of their immediate environment – who is missing and who is available. Data and insights have indicated that allyship inclusion, if maximized, can help to create diverse and inclusive tech ecosystems that are more profitable for everyone involved.

**“Allyship is understanding the imbalance in opportunity and working to change it. Allyship is seeing the person next to us and seeing who should be next to us, understanding what they’re going through and helping them succeed and thrive with us.”**



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## How does allyship inclusion work?

It is possible to get the best out of allyship inclusion if certain steps are followed. These steps are discussed below:

### Step 1 – Leading with empathy

There are two sides to allyship-based empathy. The first side is insight, and the second is engagement. There must be a balance between these two sides for leading with empathy to be effective.

1. **Insight** – This step is further divided into two stages. The first step is seeing and understanding the world of their allies. What unique or collective potentials or qualities does each person possess? How are they maximizing these qualities and potentials? The answers to these questions are essential in knowing where and how to help.

The second side involves understanding the feelings of other allies. How does their current situation affect them? The answers from such inquiries will help to devise a reliable way forward.

2. **Engagement** – This second side of empathy is also divided into two. The first part involves appreciating allies without judging them. The second, and perhaps the more critical part, is to communicate understanding. Each ally must understand and express its feelings to others.

The main aim of diversity and inclusion is to find commonalities and differences. Everyone brings a unique experience to the table, and this culminates in innovative collaborations between allies. Problems are solved, and everyone gets to learn, unlearn, and relearn.

### Step 2 – Maximizing the empathy established in Step 1

Once allies and underrepresented entrepreneurs have developed empathy, the next question is, "What can they do with it?" Interestingly, there are several ways to maximize this empathy. However, all of these ways conform to the pattern below.

- **Full attention** – Underrepresented entrepreneurs hardly get the maximum attention from allies and founders. This must improve.
- **Zero interruptions** – It is counterproductive to interrupt underrepresented entrepreneurs when presenting their ideas or experiences. It would be more productive to give everyone the chance to share their opinions and thoughts.
- **Echo and attributes** – Ideas will definitely be presented. However, every idea must be taken seriously. This will encourage presenters to open their minds to learning. Attributing the right sources is also vital. Many times, underrepresented entrepreneurs miss out on attribution, with these going to a stronger ally or entrepreneur.
- **Learn the language of communication** – People communicate in different ways. So, it is essential to learn the different styles and norms of communications that may be used in presentations.
- **Listen and learn** – The goal of allyship inclusion can only be achieved if allies are ready to listen and learn without prejudice or preconceptions. This ensures that everyone gets a level playground.

## The Challenges Faced by Underrepresented Entrepreneurs

Let us quickly recall that the main goal of allyship inclusion is to give equal chances to underrepresented entrepreneurs. To better understand the situation, let us examine some of the challenges they experience.

- **Microaggression** – These are constant negative verbal and non-verbal communications, as well as slight insults targeted at underrepresented entrepreneurs. Cut-offs and talk-downs also fall under this category.
- **Imposter syndrome** – Many underrepresented entrepreneurs are facing imposter syndrome. They have been conditioned to believe less in themselves, their abilities, and their goals.



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- **Tokenism** – This is a case of improper representation, i.e., a form of representation that excludes inclusion. It makes individuals feel undervalued and unfit, plus it depletes productivity.
- **Funding** – It is becoming increasingly difficult for underrepresented entrepreneurs to access substantial funds for their startups. Considering how vital funding is to startups, it is understandable why some entrepreneurs never see their dreams come through.
- **Stereotype threat** – This is more common among black entrepreneurs who are seen as incapable or unfit to achieve similar or bigger feats than entrepreneurs from other races. For instance, black women get a tiny percentage of tech funding because no one believes in them, and the data to support their ROI potential is lacking.
- **Years of lacking true inclusion** – The tech space still experiences intersectionality. Entrepreneurs from specific backgrounds are considered more valuable than those from other backgrounds.
- **All of the above** – Yes, some underrated entrepreneurs experience all of the challenges mentioned above. These situations are more critical, making it even more difficult for underrepresented entrepreneurs to survive.

## How Can Underrepresented Entrepreneurs be Helped?

By leveraging allyship inclusion, underrepresented entrepreneurs can enjoy some help in the following forms:

- Introducing an ideal educational institution and pattern to inform and reform the affected underrepresented entrepreneurs. Likewise, the founders must also undergo a reorientation to reshape their views about these entrepreneurs.
- Underrepresented entrepreneurs will be better off with an extensive network and chain of beneficial relationships, which they lack currently. However, this depends on if they know where and how to look.
- Organizing strategic sessions that discuss proven ways of generating organic revenue and steady overall business growth.
- Underrepresented entrepreneurs will be benefited with support mechanisms and impactful mentorship programs. Such programs may be organized and facilitated by successful entrepreneurs in the same field.

These measures, if put in place, are sure to improve the standards of underrepresented entrepreneurs, and more importantly, take us to the goal of a diverse and inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem.

## Conclusion

As established in the introduction of this article, there are no shortcuts to an all-inclusive tech entrepreneurship ecosystem, but if every stakeholder is determined to go through a series of stages, that ultimately creates a final behavior change, things are bound to improve.

Remember, this is all about achieving a change in behavior and culture through allyship inclusion. While this may take time, it will bring the desired results and solutions. So, start taking action today!



**Bio:** Felecia Hatcher is on a mission to create inclusive and diverse tech/startup ecosystems and has written extensively on the subject. She's also served as co-founder of Tribe Cowork and Urban Innovation Lab, Code Fever, and Black Tech Week. As a result of her work, Miami has become one of the most authentically diverse startup ecosystems in the country. Before joining the startup community, Felecia spent many years working in all aspects of marketing for large brands around the world. She's received numerous awards for her work in entrepreneurship and in support of building diverse ecosystems.



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