



Cohado as a Practice for Ecosystem Builders

PAULO GREGORY HARRIS ON
BREAKING DOWN THE MALE PARADIGM

Author: **Louisa Shepherd**



DIVERSITY



EQUITY



INCLUSION

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.

Summary

Paulo Gregory Harris is a man of many talents. A prolific designer, inventor, community builder, and self-proclaimed "Artist," Harris delivered a 2017 ESHIP Summit Firestarter talk inspired by the fire sparked in his own hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. In his talk, Harris suggests a simple yet profound approach to ecosystem building – the adoption of a new paradigm that fosters an interconnected ecosystem, where the idea of "ONE" no longer refers to an individual but rather mirrors a structure he refers to as Cohado, where "ONE" refers to the community as a whole.

We say that "community" and "togetherness" are concepts that we live by, but are we really truly practicing them? Are we continually evaluating our work to make sure that our efforts accrue to the benefit of society as a whole? Are we dismantling the systems that create inequity and injustice? Or are we simply treating the symptoms of "The System" that lie at the root of the problems we seek to solve?



[View the full Firestarter](#)

Harris's talk opens with scenes of men marching through Baltimore streets following the Funeral of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old man who died due to injuries sustained while in police custody on April 19, 2015.

**“If the youth are not initiated into the village,
they will burn it down, just to feel its warmth”**

– Ethiopian proverb

As Harris begins his story, he recounts a chance meeting with a young man named Eric seeking opportunities for employment and sharing his inspiration for sparking a revolution within the community. In Harris's story, he and Eric discuss their hopes for the youth of Baltimore and a vision for what their ecosystem could look like – a vision that sat in stark contrast with the community's current reality.

That current reality, Harris explains, is one of gross income disparity. Harris's graphic illustration of Baltimore's income distribution indicates median incomes of the wealthiest neighborhoods at more than \$130,000 per year, while neighborhoods populated with the lowest income earners saw annual incomes of only around \$9,000. One of those low-income neighborhoods is the very place that Harris and his team are stationed. It's called "Oldtown." A once thriving business district that served the black community, Oldtown is now dilapidated and suffering from staggering unemployment.

The Old Game

After providing contextual background about Baltimore, its income inequality, and the youth uprising in his community, Harris introduces a key concept: the male paradigm. This prevalent paradigm is built upon the concept of winning, relative to the failure of one's opponent. "You win," Harris says, "by making your opponent lose everything in their hands. You win relative to their losing."

Harris eloquently illustrates this concept by showing us a triangle whose top portion is separated from its bottom portion by one middle layer. This triangle represents "The System" which has been constructed to keep a small few at the top by persuading those in the middle layer to oppress the larger community at the bottom of the triangle.

A New Paradigm: Cohado

The male paradigm illustrated by this triangle, Harris argues, is killing the globe. As his talk continues, he shows the audience a new illustration. One where each point of the triangle is folded inward creating a hexagonal shape with a "well" in the center. This re-imagining of the triangle is called "Cohado."

The Cohado structure, Harris explains, can be replicated throughout an ecosystem. The adoption of this new paradigm eliminates the isolation so prevalent in "The System" and instead fosters an interconnected ecosystem, where the idea of "ONE" no longer refers to an individual. When an ecosystem mirrors the Cohado structure, "ONE" refers to the community as a whole.

This new paradigm is centered in oneness, wellness, and the African principle of "Ubuntu." Interestingly, as Harris points out, there is no English word or term that captures the essence of "Ubuntu," a Zulu word used to show that we, the members of a community, are responsible for one another. This principle, and the paradigm of Cohado (which is also derived from the Zulu language, meaning "the long sustainable view"), serve as a new approach that ecosystem builders can use to cultivate thriving and interconnected communities.



[View the full Firestarter](#)

Cohado: The New Game

Recognizing that people learn through play, Harris then explains how he took the concept of Cohado and transformed it into a tangible game. This game is a tool that people can use to practice the principles of Cohado, interconnectedness, and ecosystem building in a way that rewards actions rooted in community, while actions that serve the individual won't help a player win the game.

Each piece of the Cohado game represents an essential building block of the "New Operating System" that Harris envisions.

Game Pieces: Symbols of Cohado

- The zero - Vision
- The one - Viewpoint
- The two - Relationship
- The three - Creativity
- The four - Structure
- The five - Manifestation
- The six - Community
- The seven - Realization

The core rules of the game are simple: One must maximize assets for the community while minimizing waste. The object of the game is to activate all of the game pieces by pulling them together into groups of three or more. By utilizing all available pieces, and leaving no pieces alone, players can collectively lift the score higher.

Cohado as a Practice for Ecosystem Builders

In the game of Cohado, players must align the game pieces to lift up the community. In practice, Harris encourages ecosystem builders to do the same by aligning "pieces" of our collective practice – such as Human Development, Infrastructure Development, and Economic Development – to create vibrant communities.

Harris shares his vision for a reimagined Oldtown neighborhood in the city of Baltimore. He also helps listeners understand a key concept that is often lost on traditional economic developers. "The problem," Harris says, "is not the community, which is often blamed for [its own] ills. The problem is the structure of 'The System' that leaves these communities hanging." When practitioners adopt a system that mirrors the structure of Cohado, ecosystem builders can more easily create prosperity in our respective communities.

As he closes his talk, Harris returns to the idea of revolution – and explains that, through developing and learning and playing the Cohado game, he and his protege, Eric (affectionately known as Huey) have come to understand the goal is not revolution, but evolution. The goal is not to flip the original notion of "The System" upside down, but rather to evolve into a completely new paradigm – one that values community advancement and recognizes our interdependence upon one another. Harris captures the essence of this discovery with his closing remark, a well-known African proverb that says,

**“If you want to run fast, run alone.
If you want to run far, run together”**



[View the full Firestarter](#)

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Until we decide to weave concepts like “Ubuntu” and “Cohado” into the very fabric of our work and allow them to transform our thinking, our strategies, and our policies, the efforts of our work may never fully be realized. The challenge that I pose to ecosystem builders is to build something – not just something that works, but something that is transformative. I challenge us to release the need to receive credit. I challenge us to release the notion that winning must come at another’s expense. I challenge us to fully embrace the idea that we’re all connected – not just in theory, but in practice.

To learn more about Cohado, visit: <https://cohado.com/>

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: Louisa Shepherd currently serves as the director of Collective Impact at Epicenter, the Memphis, Tennessee, hub for entrepreneurship and innovation. At Epicenter, Louisa leads strategic initiatives to collect ecosystem data and measure the impact of collaborative efforts across the city, furthering Epicenter’s mission to create 500 new companies and cultivate 1,000 new entrepreneurs through idea creation, development, funding, and growth.

