



# What Are We Doing at the ESHIP Summit?



## UPDATES FROM THE FIELD

Author: **Jeff Bennett**

*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

Victor Hwang is a serial entrepreneur, investor, co-author of the ecosystem building book, [The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley](#), and former vice president of Entrepreneurship at the Kauffman Foundation. At the 2017 ESHIP Summit, Hwang set the tone for the ESHIP Summits, explaining to attendees what they would co-create, how they would do it, and establishing a framework and behavioral patterns for building the field of ecosystem building.

**The mission of the ESHIP Summit to advance ecosystem building as a more holistic approach to economic development requires a unique, collaborative approach, where attendees are encouraged to engage, share their expertise, and co-create the field of ecosystem building.** The ESHIP Summit audience is diverse, with attendees from 48 states and nine countries. Despite that diversity, we share values and beliefs that unite us:

- That entrepreneurs and innovators – the makers, the doers, and the dreamers – are the ones that make the world better
- That the more we can empower entrepreneurs, the more we can help them do their work better, resulting in a better world
- That the best way to empower entrepreneurs is by surrounding them with human relationships and giving them the environments in which they can thrive



[View the full Firestarter](#)

Though we often work in isolation, the ESHIP Summit is a chance to come together and to collaborate. 150 years ago, Kansas City was a historical launching point for heading into the American frontier, similarly the ESHIP Summit convenes and launches ecosystem builders pioneering a new American frontier.

*"I sincerely believe that we actually are here to reinvent the economy as we know it. I think we've got a fighting chance to do that and we therefore are the makers, the doers, and the dreamers that empower all those other makers, doers, and dreamers."*

### You Are The Leaders You've Been Waiting For

In society today, we tend to wait for leaders to be appointed and then to give us permission to work on an issue. The Kauffman Foundation believes that you are the leaders of the ecosystem-building movement.

*"What I'd like to offer to you is this, which is, that **you are the leaders you've been waiting for**. The people here in this room are the ones who are going to take this work forward. No one's going to give you permission. No one's going to give you an instruction manual. We have to build this together. We are the co-architects of this new world."*

### What Can We Create Together?

As co-architects of the ecosystem-building movement, what can we as a community create together? Hwang offers three ideas along with seven behavioral patterns that drive systems change.

- **Building a community of practice together:** The work of ecosystem builders is isolated and fragmented. Because of this, a key goal of the ESHIP Summit is to build a community of practice.

*"So to build this community of practice, to get people talking together, sharing ideas, starting to learn from one another."*

- **Building a playbook together:** This work is a collaborative effort, and the Kauffman Foundation is asking for the ESHIP Summit community's help.

*"The other thing we need to do in this work is to start to codify the work itself, so to start to build a playbook. We need stories. We need case studies. We need examples. We need lessons and insights and models. And what we're going to do is to start to build that field of practice, to start to codify all the great work that's happening in the field. And so we need this to be a community effort. This is a first step in a long journey, but that community of practice, building the practical tools and implementation, the metrics and the models, and the insights that power this are critically important."*

- **Defining what ecosystems really are:** Hwang believes that together we can "flesh out what ecosystems are, the science behind them, the tools and the tactics behind how to build them." Hwang's book, *The Rainforest*, explores in detail the concept of biological systems and how those natural systems are like human systems.

Most people think of the economy and business in terms of farming, maximizing the production of crops, growing as much as possible as cheaply as possible. In the farm economic metaphor, weeds are undesired. In rainforests, however, everything is a weed. "On farms, you harvest crops. In rainforests, you nurture weeds, and those weeds are the entrepreneurs, the innovators."

Building rainforests that nurture weeds requires a different approach than farming. It requires a systems approach; building environments in which the weeds can thrive. The interaction of everything in the system is what nurtures the weeds.



[View the full Firestarter](#)

In observing rainforests over time, Hwang has noticed certain patterns.

*"As things that are unpredictable turn into things that we want to harvest and become predictable, we discover certain behavioral patterns of the people — those human relationships that start to drive systems change."*

Systems change is at the heart of ecosystem building, and Hwang believes there are seven behavioral patterns that drive systems change:

### **Seven Behavioral Patterns that Drive Systems Change**

- Break rules and dream. Don't be bound by precedent.
- Open doors and listen.
- Give trust first before expecting it in return. This accelerates the speed at which trust happens.
- Seek fairness, not advantage. Don't always try to win.
- Experiment and iterate together.
- Err, fail, and persist. Make mistakes.
- Pay it forward. Give back. When you give back freely, it turns favor-giving into currency that flows like liquid throughout an entire system.

The seven behavioral patterns outlined can then be correlated to underlying values.

### **Seven Values that Drive Systems Change**

- Openness
- Diversity
- Serendipity
- Fairness
- Experimentation
- Play
- Giving

Hwang feels that the world today is missing these values. "We're not honoring and cherishing the process of creation and invention which spurs from those values in rainforests." The ESHIP Summit and the Kauffman Foundation's approach focuses on these core values.

## How Will We Do This Work?

The ESHIP Summit is designed so that the audience can participate in building an ecosystem in real time.

*"If we claim that we can transform our communities, or cities, or even countries, we should be able to do it in a single room. So that's what we're going to do; we're going to build an ecosystem in real time."*

The Kauffman Foundation is using the audience's contribution at the Summits to build a community of ecosystem builders.

*"We're gonna start to collect the stories and the case studies and the insights and the learnings you have out there and we're going to create ways for you to share them better and better."*

Empowering the audience to not only engage, but to lead, is an integral part of the work.

"So we're going to build it, but it's really up to you. It's each of you that does this work. You guys are the ones that are out in the field taking the risk, and doing this work, and we cannot do this alone at Kauffman. We have to do this with you, and we depend on you to do this great work."



[View the full Firestarter](#)

## Things Are The Opposite of What They Seem

In his years of work as an ecosystem builder, Hwang has observed three fundamental truths:

1. Altruism is actually more efficient than selfishness when it comes to entrepreneurs and innovators.
2. Handshakes are more durable than contracts.
3. Trust, and dreams, and love actually do power the world.

Hwang concludes by saying, "I know we can reinvent the economy. I know we can do this work here. I know we can start."

His invitation and encouragement to engage in building the profession of ecosystem building resonates deeply with me. Too often, society waits for others to lead the change effort. Much like the famous quote, "Be the change you want to see in the world," we need to step up and grow the profession of ecosystem building. If we, as ecosystem builders, want to have greater impact in the work we do, ecosystem building needs to advance as an emerging field — and we are the ones that need to make it happen. Hwang's encouragement to engage in that co-creation process continues to motivate the work I do.

He discusses the themes in this Firestarter talk in more detail in his short, accessible book, [The Rainforest Blueprint](#).



**Bio:** Jeff Bennett builds ecosystems at the local and field levels. At the local level, he is the co-founder and President of [StartupSac](#), a small, scrappy nonprofit in Sacramento, California, that informs, educates, and connects founders and innovators. He also works to connect and inform ecosystem builders, advancing the field across the nation. Bennett co-founded [Ecosystem Builder Hub](#), an online resource for ecosystem building news and stories, and writes extensively on the topic. He also works with the Kauffman Foundation in advancing the work of ecosystem builders and as an ESHIP Champion for ESHIP Goal 4.