



Innovation for All

Black Startup Leaders Roundtable: What we Heard

In September of 2023, Engine hosted Black leaders from across the U.S. startup ecosystem as part of our Innovation for All project. The one-hour roundtable was a free-flowing conversation where participants had a chance to highlight barriers they've faced as Black founders & leaders. This document highlights some of the key quotes from that conversation. Quotes have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity. Participants included Emily Brown - [Free From Market](#), Regina Gwynn - [Black Women Talk Tech](#), Khiry Kemp - [Oppti](#), James Jones Jr. - [Bump](#), Tiffanie Stanard - [Stimulus](#), Philip Peters - [Zagada](#), Ashley Johnson - [Wine Not](#)

On accessing capital:

- Emily Brown: “From a policy perspective, I think that goes back to, again, who can be an investor—who's considered an investor? Because we know that investors inherently are funding people that look like them, that are familiar to them. And...There are not a lot of fund managers that are women of color.”
- Regina Gwynn: “You don't necessarily have to have a Black-led fund—there are Black people in venture, but the number of partners and the number of men and women of color that actually have decision-making ability in VC funds is abysmal. There's a lot of work that needs to be done.”
- Tiffanie Stanard: “I have received more help from my angels than I have from VC firms, they have made quicker and better introductions than VC firms...So it's really important to be able to expand that pool of folks that can invest, because you're receiving money from folks that are either experts in your industry or just know your industry.”
- James Jones Jr.: “We know that there are, even under the current definition of accredited investors, eligible investors all over the US. And so by expanding that definition to encapsulate a broader group of investors, and continuing to fuel innovation with expanded access to capital, regardless of where innovation lives, regardless of where innovation is headquartered, is really going to be the key.”
- Regina Gwynn: “We need to continue to look at what is considered an accredited investor...You have to jump through hoops to literally just say, hey, look, I just want to invest in businesses, I want to invest in founders.”
- James Jones Jr.: “One of the things that I've found to be helpful is to actually set aside some money and become an LP myself. By doing this, I've been able to understand how investors, especially venture capitalists think. In essence, I have become a student of venture capitalism.”

On accessing talent/building a network:

- Khiry Kemp: “I have friends, and I've met other Black founders that have made strategic hires—for example, my first hire is going to be someone from Stanford, who has deep connections to VCs, whose fathers are in country clubs with the right folks to make those introductions. So, us founders, especially Black [founders], we figure out ways to make due with the landscape. But to everyone's point, that shouldn't be how it has to be just to gain access to these groups.”

- Tiffanie Stanard: “Finding great talent is a challenge. We're partnering with great schools to get interns. But, depending on what it is you're building and selling, you need people with more experience to build your product and to grow your team. And trying to get that talent, whether you're directly promoting within or you are trying to poach them from another company—which is a challenge, getting someone to come to a startup from a large company. A good amount of that talent is needed.”
- Emily Brown: “I think part of the challenge is access to relationships, sometimes it can be challenging because we may not have those relationships in our direct community or direct circle.”
- Ashley Johnson: “I found it challenging to even find the network that I needed to truly scale and build this business. I found that as I ventured out and expanded my network, I got better access to better talent.”
- Emily Brown: “We're based in Kansas City, so right in the heart of the country, which some people would deem flyover country. And I do think there are unique challenges for Black founders, particularly those of us who do not live on the coast, and do not live in New York, or even Atlanta or Miami. Capital networks that are here in general are smaller.”

On the need for other pathways:

- Regina Gwynn: “Part of it is, founders have to take the initiative and find the opportunities. But, the needed piece is making the process and the applications much easier. You shouldn't have to submit five years of tax returns, or, every owner has to have perfect credit scores. We make it extra hard to access these other opportunities.”
- Emily Brown: “We have raised venture capital funding, but we've also strategically used grants and philanthropy. Prior to starting Free From Market, I ran a nonprofit. So I was very skilled in grant making. I think we have to get really creative when it comes to capital, and looking at different ways that you can bring in resources to fund growth activities, that may or may not be the best use of VC dollars that have been raised. Or essentially, if you don't have VC dollars, what are other ways that you can find funds to support growth?”
- Regina Gwynn: “There's a lot of things at the SBA that could be tweaked—there should literally be an ombudsman that is dedicated to black and brown founders in each state, to make sure that every single registered startup in their state has all the materials that they need.”

On the need for a social safety net:

- Ashley Johnson: “While it's good to take care of your health, I think something that I want to put a bigger emphasis on is mental health. We know that founders and entrepreneurs already deal with a lot of stress. But I think as a Black founder, it is 10 times worse, and to have to navigate that while you can't afford therapy or have the support you need to take care of your mental well-being, I think, also poses a lot more challenges.”
- Emily Brown: “I do think access to health care is a critical issue. You know, not only for founders, but even when you are a business owner, and you're thinking about providing insurance to your employees, the system we have makes it really challenging for small companies to offer really good health care benefits.”
- Regina Gwynn: “In terms of what I wish for, what legislation I'd like to see passed, I think I would expand the childcare tax credit permanently and increase the amount.”

- Khiry Kemp: “For me, I was going for stability—I went to college, I got a consulting job, and then to make the leap to a startup was terrifying...To actually commit to go full time on a startup and unleash that innovation that I had in my mind, and leave the benefits behind. All of a sudden, you have no health care coverage.”

Other:

- Regina Gwynn: “We need better access to information about the R&D tax credit that already exists that most Black and brown founders don't take advantage of.”
- Tiffanie Stanard: “A percentage of government contracts are supposed to go to diverse suppliers. . . But they never actually get to the number that's required for that policy. And even within that policy, every year you have to pay to tell them you're Black, but non diverse companies don't have to go through that.”
- Regina Gwynn: “We need opportunities to just have more free flowing types of grants that allow founders to support basic life necessities as founders— pay for airfare, buy a bus pass, buy a metrocard, you know, get some free groceries. It's those little things that you don't know that you're constantly thinking about that you just have mental fatigue over.”