



## “Karen Catlin: Brand New Day” Season 2: Episode 7

- Speaker 1: Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology. A series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.
- Melinda Byerley: Welcome back to Stayin' Alive in Tech. Our next guest was a Vice President of Engineering at the intersection of two major companies in Silicon Valley history, Macromedia and Adobe. Since then, she has used that experience to help improve the lives of people with less privilege than her in tech. I'm going to tell you a little bit about Karen Catlin, and then I'll give you an introduction to this episode. After spending 25 years building software products and serving as a Vice President of Engineering at Adobe, Karen Catlin witnessed a sharp decline in the number of women working in tech. Frustrated but galvanized, she knew it was time to switch gears, and she is a powerhouse. You're going to hear this on the recording. Today, Karen is a leadership coach, a keynote speaker, and an author. She is a highly sought-after and engaging presenter who has delivered talks at more than 100 events. In addition to speaking herself, Karen is determined to bring more diversity to speaker lineups at tech industry events. To support this goal, she coauthored Present! A Techie's Guide to Public Speaking with Poornima Vijayashanker.
- Melinda Byerley: In 2014, Karen started the Twitter handle @betterallies, and she talks about this in our podcast today, so you'll get to hear some fascinating stories about that process, and she created that @betterallies handle to share simple, actionable steps that anyone can take to make their workplace more inclusive. That Twitter handle eventually became the inspiration for her second book, which was just published last month, January 2019, called Better Allies: Everyday Actions to Create Inclusive, Engaging Workspaces.
- Melinda Byerley: I invited Karen on the show for a few reasons. One, when I first met her, I was just astonished at sort of her vivacity and her ability to articulate

really challenging problems that women and other underrepresented minorities in tech were facing, but I was also struck by her gravitas and her credibility after having served as a vice president of engineering at Adobe. She has been in the weeds on the tech. She has been in the details and done the code, and has sort of mastered that world as well, so she speaks with authority and experience about our life in tech. She understands the culture and the way we do things, but she's so optimistic and so hopeful about where we can go from here. I felt that she really had a fantastic voice. At the same time, she was present during a change in our industry.

Melinda Byerley: Macromedia was a very popular company at the time. It was acquired by Adobe. This was an experience that I think everybody in tech can learn from, and in fact, I ask her about this, and she does make the time to sort of help you understand, if you're suddenly acquired, well, how can you actually position yourself for more success after something like an acquisition? I hope you'll enjoy this episode with Karen Catlin. Karen, welcome to the podcast.

Karen Catlin: It is so exciting to be here. Thanks for having me.

Melinda Byerley: Karen, if you've been listening to our podcast, you know that I ask this question, so pretty soon, I'm going to have to find a new one so that I can surprise people, but I'm going to ask you if you remember the first time you put your hands on a computer.

Karen Catlin: I do, and there's an interesting story about it, because the first time I put my hands on a computer was my freshman year in college in my intro to computer science class. I went to college declared as a computer science major, and I had never touched a computer until the first day of classes. There you go. I remember exactly the day.

Melinda Byerley: Audacious. Wait, what?

Karen Catlin: What?

Melinda Byerley: You got to tell me, how did you decide to major in computer science if you'd never touched a computer?

Karen Catlin: Okay. The year, first of all, and everyone's going to, if they're good at math, will be able to tell how old I am, but I'm okay with that.



- Melinda Byerley: We celebrate that here.
- Karen Catlin: Celebrate that. I graduated from high school in 1981, so that's the year I first touched a computer. If, for those listeners who were around then, they remember that most high schools didn't have computers then, our small businesses that we might have worked after-school jobs didn't have computers. We certainly didn't have home computers, or very, very few of us did. It wasn't that unusual that I had never touched a computer in 1981, but the reason I decided to major in computer science is, I still remember this conversation I had with my father when I was a senior in high school.
- Karen Catlin: I had just gotten accepted to college, and then it was like, "What do I want to major?" Then we were having a discussion, and my dad said to me, "Karen, you're good at math, and you enjoy that. You like solving problems and puzzles, and you're always making things." I was a big sewer, knitter, crafter, that type of person, so, "You're always making things, Karen, and so maybe you would enjoy putting all those skills together and that you would enjoy making software." At the time, he showed me a magazine, it was Money magazine, and on the cover was a story about women who had studied computer science in the late '70s and had gone on to these incredible careers, and they were making a ton of money.
- Karen Catlin: I have to admit, we came from an incredibly modest background, and being able to see these role models in this magazine and the kind of salary that they were earning and then having my dad say, "You'd probably be good at that," I was like all in. I'm like, "Okay. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to major in computer science," even though I had never touched a computer. There is the story.
- Melinda Byerley: Were you alone in that when you arrived on campus? You said it was fairly unusual at that point, so did your classmates, did they all have that experience or not?
- Karen Catlin: Many had not. Many had gone to high schools where they had learned some BASIC and that type of thing, but there were a lot of us who had never done any programming, so it wasn't that unusual. Yeah, but definitely there were some kids who had some experience. Whatever, but some just didn't. Yeah. I wasn't the only one.



- Melinda Byerley: Out of curiosity, and this will get into some of the work that you're doing right now, do you remember what percentage of the class were women?
- Karen Catlin: I do, because I've gone back and counted in my yearbook-
- Melinda Byerley: Wow.
- Karen Catlin: ... because I was curious about this a while ago. In 1985, when I graduated with my bachelor's degree, 38% of the graduating class in computer science were women, 38% of us. That's very consistent with the statistics that you can find online from the government where they report on different majors and how many people major in these things. In 1985, across the whole United States, 37 and a half percent of all the computer science and information science degrees went to women. 1985, I'm kind of proud of that year, because that was the peak. That was the peak of women studying computer science in the United States, and I was a part of that class.
- Melinda Byerley: Now do you have any sense of how well they're doing with percentage of women in engineering?
- Karen Catlin: Yeah, there are a couple, the reports are a couple years behind, but it's dropped to like a low of 17%.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow.
- Karen Catlin: It's not just the percentage has dropped. It's like the overall number of women getting computer science degrees has also been declining while the number of men is just substantially increasing year on year. It's starting to go back up, though, and so I think that there has been so much attention to this issue that we don't have a lot of women in technical, getting technical degrees, getting computer science degrees. There's been so much attention to that in programs like Girls Who Code and even making AP Computer Science in high school more attainable for people who have never programmed before and so forth. There's so much good stuff happening that we're starting to see the numbers come back up, and I think I'm pretty hopeful that it's going to keep trending upward.
- Melinda Byerley: I get why you started. Right? You heard the stories, you were like me, a person of modest means, this is an opportunity, a way up. When did you

get hooked? A lot of people start, but not as many finish. What kept you going?

Karen Catlin: Oh, my gosh, it was so fun. It was hard. It was really hard work. It did not come naturally to me, but I stuck with it because it was fun, and it was that making kind of desire I had. I loved making things, and software really was yet another thing I could make, and to just be able to see my programs compile and produce the right output, and then as I moved into doing things that had more visual interfaces, to just see and play with that and make something that was beautiful, it turned me on. It was wonderful.

Melinda Byerley: I want to fast-forward, because one of the reasons I asked you onto this podcast was that you were in the center of a very important acquisition in Silicon Valley, and I would love for you to talk first about at the company you started at, and sort of how that process of acquisition happened.

Karen Catlin: Yes, so I, you're talking about when Macromedia was acquired by Adobe Systems. I joined Macromedia in, I think it was 1993. I was employee number like 140, I think it was, and so it was a very small company. I joined just after it IPOed, and we were scrappy. We were scrappy. We really worked hard and over time grew and definitely rode a wonderful ride through the whole 1.0 internet time where we were creating authoring tools for ... Originally it was for multimedia, and DVDs, and even diskettes back in the day. Then we morphed and evolved those authoring tools to adapt to creating websites that had a lot of interaction, a lot of graphics, a lot of animation on them. We were well poised to leverage our history, I'll call it, and our talent, our techniques, our expertise, and to move forward into creating tools for internet.

Karen Catlin: It was a super exciting time. The company was doing really well, and our biggest competitor was Adobe Systems, and Adobe was also doing things with authoring tools as well as, of course, some of its like flagship projects, products like Photoshop, for example, so just, they were well known in their space. We were well known in our space. There was definitely a lot of competition, and eventually Adobe decided to reach out to us and acquire us. Now, while I was a vice president of engineering at Macromedia, I was not involved with all those conversations, I was surprised as everyone else the morning it was announced-



Melinda Byerley: Holy smokes. Really?

Karen Catlin: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It wasn't, well ... Well, it was being guarded, because it had to be. It had to be...

Melinda Byerley: Public acquisition, yeah.

Karen Catlin: Exactly. It had to be carefully guarded, so I found out ... I remember I was getting ready to go to work, and one of my husband's friends called him and said, "Hey, this, I just saw this come across the news," and my husband called out to me. He's like, "This is just happening." I'm like, "No, you're kidding. You're pulling my chain," but it was the real deal. Yeah, and so that's how that came about.

Melinda Byerley: What was the culture like at Macromedia? We all think we've seen it, right? We've watched The Social Network, or some of us have been in some of these rocket ship companies, but it was a different time then, and I think it'd be instructive to talk a little bit about life at Macromedia sort of post-IPO at that time.

Karen Catlin: Yeah, so in some ways, so it was male-dominated, like every other tech company, definitely. That said, some of the men at the top, and I'm thinking about some of my managers and sort of up the management chain in engineering, were, they were some of the really good guys, the kind of guys that really are supportive of everybody. They sponsored me. I'm just thinking about myself. They sponsored me. They supported what I wanted to be doing, and I'll just share with you, I started my family when I was working at Macromedia. I have two children, and my managers were all so supportive of me figuring out what that was going to look like for me, like to do the right thing so that I could continue working, but spend the right amount of time with my kids. In fact, I worked part-time for 10 years when I was working at Macromedia. From the time I came back from maternity leave with my daughter, my oldest, for the next 10 years I worked part-time, because I just wanted to have a little bit more time every week with my kids. That was the right thing for me, and I had support for that.

Karen Catlin: The culture, not that everyone around Macromedia's working part-time, but that was my situation, my life goals, and I got that support. While Macromedia was definitely male-dominated, I felt a lot of great support there. That said, it didn't, it wasn't like there wasn't any misogyny, there



wasn't ... It's not like I can say it was just all perfect, but it was really a pretty good place.

Melinda Byerley: I know. It's funny when you mentioned it, like I've had some of the greatest experiences of my tech career working with people from Macromedia, so I don't know everybody that worked there, obviously, but some of the great guys I've worked with absolutely came out of that culture. You know who you are. I believe it when I hear you say that. Was the policy, was your working part-time a difficult thing to set up? Was it part of the culture? Were there other people doing it?

Karen Catlin: I do not know if there was anyone else doing it when I told my boss I wanted to, and he was just supportive, and we just made it happen. After that, I certainly became someone who was very open to having other people work part-time for me, including whether it was for desire to be...spend more time with children, for parental reasons, or to, because someone wanted to be able to go to grad school and still be working and wanted to do a part-time thing. I certainly was very open to that.

Karen Catlin: I have to admit, or emphasize, I guess, I want to emphasize that during the dotcom days, and you remember this, it was so hard to hire talent. There was not enough talent to go around. It's similar to what it is today, but it felt a little bit more frenzied in terms of the lack of talent and the growth that everything was going through, and so when we were able to retain someone who was a valuable employee, yet let them work part-time, it was sort of like win-win-win-win all the way around. I was very open to doing that when it made sense, yeah.

Melinda Byerley: What was it like, so after you get acquired, was the culture at Adobe different? How was it different?

Karen Catlin: Yeah, so it was different, and it, if you can, if I can use like one word for each culture, so Macromedia was kind of scrappy, and Adobe was a little bit more formal, where at Macromedia, and we were smaller company, the culture was such that if you saw something that needed to get done, you could just go do it. You could fix something. You could propose something. You could make things happen. People move just quickly, and there's a lot of trust there for doing the right thing and supporting that culture of, "Just go make it happen if you see something."



- Karen Catlin: At Adobe, not that it wasn't completely like that, but there were more things set up in terms of structure. There was much more culture, and it's a lovely culture, but a culture of getting a lot of support across an organization or across teams or across the company, getting a lot of support before moving forward with something. That was a very different approach. At Macromedia, you just kind of go do it, and at Adobe, you went around, got support, figured out the right solution, and then built that-
- Melinda Byerley: So you had-
- Karen Catlin: ... so it was-it felt different.
- Melinda Byerley: ... to go be in more meeting. You had to be in more meetings, probably. I'm just... To make it real concrete for people who are listening, I think what you're saying is, you have to be in more meetings. It takes more time to get, and it takes longer to execute.
- Karen Catlin: Takes, probably, yes, and I certainly had to build up my network. I was very sort of well known at Macromedia. I had been there 12 years at the time of the acquisition. I think most, I mean, most people in engineering knew me. I knew them, and certainly new people across other parts of the org too, but then going to a bigger company that I really didn't know anyone else, I had to start networking. I employed some best practices that someone else smarter than me shared with me, such as, ask your new boss for 10 people that you should meet, and go meet with them, and then build up your network and your relationships with people before you really need them to start when you first have that new idea or that new process or that new whatever that you want to go pursue. Make sure you have your network and your support in place before you need to do that.
- Melinda Byerley: Were the people at Adobe ... Not to tell stories, although we'll let people tell stories, but, I mean, did you find they were receptive? Sometimes, in acquisitions, I went to PayPal after eBay acquired them, and it was a contentious acquisition. It was not a happy, but let's say that one side of that transaction was very happy, other was less excited. That played out in when I switched companies, I felt very, I felt like I was in a very different company at PayPal than I was at eBay, and so was that a friendly acquisition, or was it, or not?



- Karen Catlin: It was friendly. I felt supported, received, all of that type of thing. That said, when we merged the two companies, even though it was an acquisition, the merging process was painful, because certain teams did not make the cut because there were duplicative teams at Adobe or at Macromedia, and so there was a pretty big restructuring before the two teams, or the two companies, were brought together. That was painful. That always is, but that, I think, laid the groundwork for very productive time moving forward. It was like, "Okay, now we've made these decisions, and we're all on board, and we have to move forward and just execute and make things happen."
- Melinda Byerley: It was one of the more successful acquisitions, if I remember correctly, in tech. It went well. The companies, they sort of figured it out, but I was farther on the outside and a few years behind you, but my perception on the outside was that it was not, that it was a very positive situation.
- Karen Catlin: Yeah, and-
- Melinda Byerley: All in.
- Karen Catlin: Yeah, and today, I mean, it depends how you measure success, but from being there, it felt successful, and certainly, if you look at the stock price today-
- Melinda Byerley: Exactly.
- Karen Catlin: ... and everything, it's very successful, yeah, so I think that's a good way to describe it.
- Melinda Byerley: Let's say you get acquired, whether you're an engineer, or head of engineering, or marketer, or whoever, you get acquired by this new company, and if I take your advice and I meet with five or 10 people, what am I asking in that meeting? What is it I'm looking for, and how do I put my best foot forward?
- Karen Catlin: Yeah, so I'll share what I did. I think it laid the groundwork for people to get to know me as a leader, as a manager, as an employee. I have to be helpful. I have to understand what other people are trying to achieve and help them achieve that. As a people manager, that means I need to understand what deliverables we have as a team, but I also have to understand what my employees want and need from their careers, and



career growth, and their desires and so forth. Right? I'm always thinking, "How can I be helpful?"

Karen Catlin: When I was first part of at Adobe and doing all this networking, my role, which was the same at Adobe and at Macromedia, my role was running the shared engineering services across all the products, and so it included things like the localization and internationalization of all the products, included product security for the products, and code hardening, and incident response types of things. It included what's now called infrastructure, but at the time, we called it release engineering, and some quality work, and beta releases, and things like that. That was engineering services.

Karen Catlin: When I went and met with these different leaders that I needed to work with, other VPs of engineering primarily, and senior directors and so forth, I would tell them what I was doing, and then I would always ask, "Tell me about your experience working with my predecessor and with the teams." I took over from somebody else who was let go during the merger, and combined his teams with my teams and mashed them all together, and so I ask questions of, "What was working really well before? What wasn't working so well before? Here's my approach to things. How's that sound?"

Karen Catlin: Really trying to understand and taking time like, "Tell me about your" ... Most of Adobe had yearly goals broken down by quarter, so, "tell me about your goals. What are you trying to achieve this year? What do they look like on paper? How are you measuring those, and how can I help you be successful?" Taking a lot of notes, trying to understand that and figuring out how we could best meet the needs of the company, because that's what my job was is really to meet the needs of engineering with, from the point of view of the different areas I was responsible for. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley: That's helpful advice no matter what you're doing. I mean, whether you're a junior employee that's starting in a new job, or whether you've just been acquired as a VP of engineering, taking that sort of, "How can I help you," approach is going to buy you a lot of points with people. It's good advice all the way around.

Karen Catlin: Yes, and the other thing is to ask about the impact of the work, like what are your goals? How do you measure impact? Then trying to connect the



dots of how the work you are going to be doing can help deliver on those impact, impact statements I'll call them. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley: Wow, isn't that great for your résumé, because then you're like, "Well, what did you do?" You're like, or in your annual review, "Look, see? I did the foo thing that this team needed me to do, and here was the result, because they told me."

Karen Catlin: Exactly, and I have to tell you, I coach a lot of women. That's what I do professionally now, and I love coaching women on trying to understand exactly the impact of their work. Many women, especially if they are engineers and early in their career and heads down, and they think, "If I just do good engineering work, somebody is going to notice, and I will get recognized." When I ask them, it's like, "Well, do you know why you were asked to fix those high-priority bugs or to develop that new feature, or why you've been assigned to this new team? What is the impact on the business?" So many of these women, especially the early career women, do not know.

Karen Catlin: They haven't been told, like, "This is what success looks like when we deliver on this update to, with all these bug fixes or this new functionality," and so how do they really know, like in the heat of the moment, how they're supposed to prioritize maybe some of the smaller tasks that they are doing if they don't really understand the bigger picture, if they don't understand how their smaller tasks are going to contribute to that definition of success?

Karen Catlin: I coach a lot of women. It's like you have to ask these questions and make sure that you understand how your work is impacting the quote-unquote "bottom line" for your team or your division or your whole company, and exactly that comment about like, and this helps you then position your work in terms of talking about it at your next check-in with your manager about your performance at your next more formal annual appraisal where you're writing a self-appraisal, or on your résumé or LinkedIn profile to just be able to talk about the impact of your work.

Melinda Byerley: Yeah. You probably have a nicer way of saying it than I do, but I call it the "so what?" You have the bullet on your résumé, but so what? The answer to "so what" is what people are more interested in rather than the bullet.

Karen Catlin: Exactly. Exactly.



Melinda Byerley: This is actually a wonderful segue into something I was dying to talk to you about, and that is your current work. I know that you coach women in particular to be stronger leaders and men to be better allies, but I was reading some things you had written about your time at Adobe and sort of your awakening on some of these issues, so maybe we can go back in the time machine again, it's back to that, those experiences that you had that sort of awakened you to the work that you do now.

Karen Catlin: Yes, so when I was at Adobe, and it was soon after the acquisition, one of the senior VPs of engineering told me, and I think this was in 2006, he told me, "Hey, Karen, I've been sponsoring this thing called the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing for a couple years, and I think it's a good organization, but I honestly don't know. Would you mind going to the next conference and checking it out?" I said, "Sure. Okay. I'll go do that." I went to the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing a few months later, and I was, oh, my gosh, blown away. First of all, it was tiny. Right now, I think it's like 20,000 people go to this conference, this yearly conference, but back then, it was only like less than 1,000 people.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

Karen Catlin: It was this intimate conference with these incredibly talented leaders across tech, and a lot of women, and people were having these great conversations about the lack of gender diversity in tech, and all of these supports and programs and issues and all sorts of things that could be done to address the problem, and my eyes were opened wide. I feel like leading up to that, I had just been so heads down in my career and raising my kids and doing my work that I hadn't noticed this decline happening right before my eyes, this decline like when I think back now early in my career where there were roughly 37 or 38% of this computer science degrees going to women, there used to be a lot of women in the cubes next to me at mine in the offices next to mine. Every team had women on it. It was just such a different situation, and I kind of didn't notice that this decline was happening until I went to the conference and I was like, "Oh, my goodness."

Karen Catlin: The numbers bore it out, and as I started thinking about what was going on at Macromedia and my experience just early on at Adobe, it's like, yeah, there aren't as many women as there used to be. We did not have a women's employee resource group or affinity group, so I started that. I



started siphoning off a small chunk of my VPs, like kind of my discretionary budget to sponsor a book club for women who wanted to do that or some happy hours to increase networking or lunches where we could talk about different topics. I started mentoring a lot of women as well myself, so I started just trying to figure out, what does Adobe, and what do the women across Adobe need in support so that if they want to stay at Adobe, they feel that they can, and they feel that they can grow their career at Adobe even though it was male-dominated, just like every other tech company?

Karen Catlin: I started experimenting. I started doing a lot of this sponsorship work and mentoring, and over the next, I don't know, N years, four or five years, I slowly started realizing that I am super passionate about supporting women at the company, and I want to do that full time, and I want to do it not just for Adobe, but kind of the industry overall.

Karen Catlin: In 2012, I left Adobe and started my own business as initially as an advocate for women who work in tech, which meant I was a leadership coach. I since have shifted it slightly, I'll explain why, I've shifted it slightly to be an advocate for inclusive workplaces, so not just for women, but for anyone who's from an underrepresented background, whether that is because of their sexual orientation, their race, ethnicity, their religious preferences, their abilities, physical, visible, or otherwise, their age, and so forth.

Karen Catlin: Whatever the demographic is that you feel you're a part of that is underrepresented in tech, which makes it hard to get ahead, I want to help people, all of those people, which is a pretty big sort of goal, but I'm doing my best. And so the reason I decided to broaden my focus just from women to all these other underrepresented groups, it took me a while to get there, I have to admit. I wish I could have done this right from the get-go, but it took me a while to get there. I started realizing that even if I were the most awesome leadership coach on the planet, which I don't think I am, but even if I were, and even if the clients I was coaching, these women, were total pros at leaning into their careers, they were still facing problems. I couldn't coach them through all of these things because the workplaces just were not supportive to them.

Karen Catlin: I started realizing that the men who are in positions of power across tech, especially the white men, they needed to be doing things to make their workplaces more inclusive, and it wasn't just more inclusive for



women, it was more inclusive for everyone who was from a marginalized or underrepresented group. Four years ago, I started this work of exploring like, how to guide men, like, "Here's what we need you to do, men. This is what we want you to step up to." I started doing this four years ago through literally an anonymous Twitter handle. It's called-

Melinda Byerley: Really?

Karen Catlin: Yeah. It's called @betterallies. It was anonymous to begin with, because I wasn't quite sure what I was doing, and I wasn't quite sure what trolls would start coming after me, so I just was doing it anonymously, and I was tweeting everyday actions, like simple things that men really could be doing to better support their female colleagues and their colleagues from other underrepresented groups. For these tweets that I was putting out there, I always liked paying attention to research, research from sociologists, social scientists who were studying workplace dynamics. I was tweeting media reports of different people's first-hand experiences and looking for, "Here's the big research that just came out from," like the Clayman Institute, or the NCWIT, which is the National Center for Women & Information Technology. There are people out there doing this great research, but how do you break it down and put it into action?

Karen Catlin: I was able to leverage the basically the 25 years I spent working in tech to figure out, "Okay, if I were an individual contributor, or a first-line manager, or a VP, what could I do with this data that's out there, this research, these news reports, these first-hand anecdotal stories that are being shared online? What could I do as an individual to put that into action?" I leveraged all the experience I had working in tech with this desire to make a more inclusive tech industry, and that's what I started tweeting. These tweets were first-person, so I didn't mean to be deceptive, but I was kind of tweeting like I was pretending to be a man, like, "I pledge to do this differently. I strive to be more inclusive by doing these things." Everything was first-person and a little bit affirmational, and sort of paving the way forward for what this might look like.

Melinda Byerley: I'm fascinated by the fact that the assumption was that because you were first person, you were male, but like ... Fascinated. We can go there, but I'll let you keep going.



- Karen Catlin: I know. Well, I was at a meetup a couple years ago, and I noticed, like I was tweeting about this meetup, and I noticed that one of my followers on this anonymous handle was also tweeting about the meetup. I wanted to meet him, so I had sent him a direct message on Twitter and said, "Hey, we're both at the same meetup. I'd love to say, 'Hi.'" He's like, "Great. Let's find each other during the break." I wrote, tweeted back, or DMed him back, and like, "Great, and I'm the one wearing the red poncho." Okay, because I had a red poncho on. I was very easy to spot, and I don't know many dudes who wear ponchos. I mean, it's not uncalled for, but it's just more of a feminine...
- Melinda Byerley: Besides the Three Amigos. Besides the-
- Karen Catlin: Yeah, exactly. It's just more of a feminine fashion statement, so I walked up to him, and he just started laughing at me, and he said, "You know what? I thought you were a dude." It was like, "Great, because that's just fine if you thought I was a dude." Anyway, so I started this Twitter handle four years ago. Over time, it's just, it's growing in popularity. I'm pretty proud of this little Twitter handle. It's the kind of thing that Twitter can be a cesspool. I know so many people do not like Twitter, and I understand why, yet I really have not experienced much of that at all. By contrast, I have experienced so much support on Twitter. I would get people tweeting suggestions of everyday actions or research that I might have missed, so it was like this groundswell of support on Twitter that helped me grow this handle.
- Karen Catlin: Over time, about, well, a little over a year ago, I started a newsletter. I started a Medium channel where I also publish information, and then this summer, I put my head down and like, "I just have to write the book," and so I've recently published a book. It came out in January of 2019, so ...
- Melinda Byerley: Congratulations. Yay.
- Karen Catlin: The book is called Better Allies: Everyday Actions to Create More Inclusive, Engaging Workplaces.
- Melinda Byerley: Who did you write the book for?
- Karen Catlin: I wrote the book, I really had in mind the white men who are in positions of privilege and power in tech. That's my primary audience, but that said,

it is really for anyone who's working in tech who wants to understand the role that they can play. We all have some privilege, even though we might be a member of an underrepresented group, such as like I'm a woman, but I have privilege because I'm a white woman. I'm a white woman with a computer science degree who has been a VP of engineering. Right? I mean, it's just like I have all of this privilege even though I'm a member of this marginalized group, being a female. I wrote it for people who have some privilege that would allow them to open these doors to make statements to create, to take action, basically, to create more inclusion on their teams, starting very small, starting right with their immediate ecosystem at work. That's who I wrote it for.

Melinda Byerley: I want to talk about the book specifically in a second, because I love to get into specifics of how we can all be better at this, and I agree with you, as a white woman, right, that it was one thing to acknowledge my own sort of oppression, but it was another to recognize how I might be contributing to other people's oppression or at least not do anything about it, and so I really love to talk about specifics, but before we go there, I'm absolutely fascinated by your sort of direct statement that you've written it for these people, for white men to start with.

Melinda Byerley: The reason I am is, I was thinking about Lean In, and I was thinking about how white men everywhere were handing Lean In to their female colleagues. In some cases, it was the other way. There were definitely demonstrated stories of men who were like, "Wow. This is amazing. I need to ..." They recommend it to other men. What's been the response like so far? I know we're only in February of 2019, but do you get the harrumph harrumph, or do you get ... There are men I could imagine handing that book to, and there are men who like it would scare the crap out of me, like I'd have to sort of anonymously slide it under the desk in the middle of the night and hope that they found it.

Karen Catlin: Yeah. Yeah. Sure. There are going to be those men, first of all, who won't even bother reading it. That's fine, or who might read the first chapter, too, and just like, "This is too hard," or, "This is uncomfortable," or, "This isn't important," or, "I don't need no stinking diversity at my company." It's fine. It's fine.

Karen Catlin: I know there are going to be those naysayers out there, but that didn't stop me, because there are so many people I hear from who even before I wrote the book who were like, "I'm hungry for this information. I

really care about diversity and inclusion, but what am I supposed to do? I don't get it," or, "I have tried some things, and clearly, there's a line in the sand that I've crossed over and I didn't even know I was crossing over. I try to be supportive."

Karen Catlin: "I try to be helpful, but I did something wrong, and so now I'm just taking a big step back and not even getting involved, so if you can tell me what to do, Karen, I'm all in. I want to know, because I do care. I want ... It feels like a moral imperative," or, and, I guess, and, "There's all this research out there that shows that diverse companies are more innovative. They solve difficult problems better, and they are, it's better for the bottom line of the company. They're more profitable."

Karen Catlin: There are people who are like, believe this research that shows diversity is good for business. There are people who also believe that diversity feels like a moral imperative. "I want to support people from all sorts of different backgrounds, but what am I supposed to do?" This book is in many ways a roadmap or a blueprint for, what are you supposed to do?

Melinda Byerley: You mentioned sort of the financial benefits. You mentioned sort of the moral imperative, but to anyone who still wonders, in your opinion, why is it important to have an inclusive workplace?

Karen Catlin: Okay, so if ... Let's just talk about tech. My book is not tech-specific, even though there are a lot of tech examples, because that's my background, but let's talk about tech specifically. There is a big hiring shortfall in tech, and it's projected only to get worse as we move into the next sort of 10 to 15 years, and so ... You and I are both in Silicon Valley, and we know about this tech hiring shortfall, but it's kind of across the United States, if not across the world, right now, and layer on top of that, in the United States we have record low unemployment right now, which means there aren't enough workers to be doing jobs. Whether they are highly technical in nature or just other kinds of jobs, right, so we have a hiring problem.

Karen Catlin: We have a talent shortfall, and so why the heck wouldn't you want to make your company as inclusive as possible so that people, once they get in the door, they want to stay there, and not only do they want to stay there, they do their best work, and it's so awesome to work there that they want all their friends to work there too, and so they refer friends, they refer their contacts? Who wouldn't want that?



Melinda Byerley: It sounds like a loyalty program. Me, as a marketer, I think it's the way we treat our best customers.

Karen Catlin: There you go.

Melinda Byerley: I love getting concrete, because I tend to ... Like you, I tend to sort of think in large, abstract, and so getting right into the meat of it. Even just talking to me, like even as a white woman, like let's not bash our theoretical white men friends. Let's not talk at them. Let's get real. Myself as a white woman who runs a company, how can I, on an everyday basis, make my company more inclusive?

Karen Catlin: Yes. I'll talk about just one area to start, and we can go from there, but one area is feedback, feedback that you give to employees and that other people within your company give to each other. There is research from Clayman Institute at Stanford that talks about how, and this makes sense, that vague feedback holds women back. Of course, if we're not getting constructive feedback about how our work could improve, how we could have a more of an impact on the company's business, how we, new skills that we should be learning, if we're not getting those concrete, constructive kinds of pieces of feedback, of course we're going to be held back, because we don't, we improve through feedback. Right? We won't necessarily know what we're doing.

Karen Catlin: The research that was done by Clayman, they studied annual written performance reviews from three very large tech companies and one professional services company. They looked at the formal feedback by gender, and they were noticing some very different, excuse me, very big differences by gender. One is that the women were not told about new skills that they should be developing, like the hard skills, so the technical skills or some very job-related skill, whereas men were given that feedback. "We recommend you pursue or learn this new kind of technology, this new skill." That's one thing.

Karen Catlin: Another thing, women were getting shorter performance reviews than men, so men were getting more feedback, which, again, would allow the constructive criticism to come in. Women were being told that they were, being described using adjectives that are not surprising, maybe, to you. You've probably seen some of this, but, "You're too aggressive," but at the same time, it's like it's all about the team, so the, "You and the team did this," whereas the men were getting, having reviews that had



adjectives that we value in business, like things like, "You're innovative. You're a powerhouse. You're," like whatever.

Melinda Byerley: "You're decisive."

Karen Catlin: Decisive, all these things, so we use different language when we're giving feedback to men versus women, and what the research uncovered is, or maybe it's a different research, set of research that I read as well, but there's research out there that shows that we tend to not give the hard, constructive feedback to people who are different from us, so if we are a man, we don't tend to give that kind of constructive feedback to a woman, because we don't want to be seen as sexist. If we are a white person, we don't give constructive feedback to someone, perhaps, who is a person of color, because we don't want to come across as seeming bigoted.

Karen Catlin: If we are someone who has a computer science degree from a four-year institution, we might not give that really constructive, hard feedback to someone from, who's a bootcamp grad, because we don't want to offend them and make them think that we are biased against people who don't have four-year degrees. Right? Whatever it is. We don't cross the lines of those demographics when we're giving hard feedback, so my ... Hopefully this wasn't too long, but getting back to your question of what can you do as a small, I assume a small business owner. I don't mean to say... Yeah, a small-

Melinda Byerley: No, I don't mind that.

Karen Catlin: Yeah, is, make sure you're giving equitable feedback to all of your employees.

Melinda Byerley: The classic management technique, be specific, be precise, focus on the work, not the person, the classic sort of things that we get trained about, but make sure that we're doing this, pay extra special attention to people who may have less privilege than us, and make sure that that, you're being as thorough, I guess, is the right word, whereas-

Karen Catlin: Exactly.

Melinda Byerley: ... complete-



- Karen Catlin: As thorough.
- Melinda Byerley: Like working through the framework. Check all the boxes. Don't skip over. How would you address ... Like I really liked what you brought up about how we're less likely to give feedback to people with less privilege because of our fear of being seen as bigoted, or sexist, or homophobic, or what have you. How can I deal, how could I deal with that if I felt that way?
- Karen Catlin: Yes. One thing that is a best practice is, before you have any kind of, like if you're kicking off a performance review season, and you're doing some training or you're just rolling out the process with your team, is, remind people of how this bias can creep in. Remind people that, "Hey, we tend not to give feedback that's really constructive and helpful to people who are different from us." Just raising the awareness is going to help combat that in a moment when people are thinking, "I'm holding myself back." That's just one thing, a best practice to do, is remind people of the bias that is natural and can creep into the process so that they're aware of it when they are actually executing on that process, giving that performance feedback. You can also literally like make sure your any kind of written reviews are roughly the same length. Simple, right?
- Melinda Byerley: Yeah. That's sort of a measure. That's a measurement for those of you who are engineers and need firm guidelines. There's a way to measure, actually, your review and a check that you can look for. You said it's because, it's when people are different, so in some cases, gender bias even creeps in between women, so when women are giving reviews to woman, since I am a women. I am a women. I am a woman. Is that still the case, or are there different things to look for?
- Karen Catlin: It can be the case that, but women, I mean, we might hold back from giving feedback if we are a straight woman to someone who is gay, if we are an able-bodied person to someone who has a disability, and so forth, so I still think we need to check ourselves.
- Melinda Byerley: Yeah. That's totally fair. What I liked about, too, you mentioned earlier that there were at every level of the organization, you could be a better ally, and in some of your work, I was reading about sort of some of the everyday actions people can take. Let's flip it around now and say, talking to some of the, you're fresh out of college or in your first job, you think you don't have a lot of power to create an inclusive workplace. What can



people who are earlier in their careers or in an individual contributor role do to help?

Karen Catlin: Yes. Yes. I provide this advice to everybody, and it's very applicable to people right out of school or early in their career, is, make sure you are creating a diverse network, a diverse professional network.

Melinda Byerley: True.

Karen Catlin: The reason, and the ways to go about doing that is, here is the practical side, the everyday action, is, the next time you're anywhere where you're, have an opportunity to meet people, is introduce yourself to someone who doesn't look like you, whether it's a different gender, a different race, something else, like just introduce yourself to someone who doesn't look like you as a starting point. All too often, we have, and again, social science backs this up, we have networks that are quote-unquote "just like me," filled, and I'm guilty of this too, I have many more white women in my network than any other demographic, and so we build these networks because we like talking to these people. We have something in common with them. We like hanging out with them, with people like us, but that ends up, it can create an echo chamber-

Melinda Byerley: They may not challenge us. They may not challenge us-

Karen Catlin: They don't challenge us.

Melinda Byerley: ... on the things that we need to be challenged on.

Karen Catlin: Exactly. We may not have role models to be thinking differently about things, which is similar to what you just said, but also when it comes down to trust, we trust the people in our network, and that trust in the workplace is huge. The trust is, kind of comes out and is put into action when we are thinking about, "Well, who are we going to recommend for that cool new opportunity or that job that just got opened up on our team?"

Karen Catlin: We're going to recommend people that we know and that we trust. Right? Or if we're a manager and there's some stretch assignment, and by the way, stretch assignments are often what fuel career growth, so there's some stretch assignment, like I need someone to go spend two weeks somewhere talking to a customer or working with a customer, or I

need someone to spend time exploring this new technology or doing some due diligence on this acquisition we're about to have, or whatever it is. Right? When we have these stretch assignments, we, again, are going to be thinking of the people in our network that we trust. If it's full of people just like us, we're going to be recommending people just like us to go through these stretch assignments.

Karen Catlin: It also comes out when we're doing any kind of workforce planning, like if we're having to do layoffs or if we're having to do kind of reorgs or even succession planning. That was the phrase I was looking for. When we're doing workforce planning, again, we're going to be recommending people who are like us, so back to like the brand new college person or brand new into their career is, they need to be networking with people who aren't like them so that they can be broadening their network and making those recommendations as they hear about them, but they also need to broaden their network so that people who aren't like them in positions of power will know about them and be able to get to know them and recommend them for these great new, whatever it is, stretch assignment workforce planning opportunities and so forth.

Melinda Byerley: Because trust goes both ways. Now, I'm lecturing for a moment, because I'm the host and sometimes I can do that, and this is what I've been saying to a lot of men in my case. I'm like, "You don't realize that people who are serious about this work, they talk to each other, and now we have our own brand of trust, and we want allies around us who get it and who, or at least are on the journey, on the path. Nobody is ever done with this work. It is a lifetime's worth of work, but if you have a choice between someone who is known to at least be aware and working on it versus the person who isn't, it's an easy choice."

Karen Catlin: Yes. Definitely.

Melinda Byerley: It kind of goes both cases. I'm trying to remember the specifics, but I also liked in that article about things you can say in meetings, and I was thinking about the Obama staff and how the, so maybe you could talk a little bit about that, too.

Karen Catlin: Yes, so right towards the end of Obama's second term in office, an article came out about a strategy that female staffers on Obama's staff were using in his staff meetings. It turns out, and it kind of happened, my understanding is, it kind of happened organically, but the women were

noticing that they might say something in Obama's staff meeting, and it maybe was going to be a good idea, but it fell maybe on deaf ears, it didn't really go anywhere, and then a man in the meeting later on in the meeting would say the same thing and get all the credit.

Karen Catlin: What the women, the female staffers, started doing is a technique they called amplification. That simply is when any of the female staffers would say something in the meeting, another woman would immediately add to it and say something like, "I really like the way Hillary has focused on this area of blah blah blah," whatever. Mention the woman's name and then bring attention to it, to this idea, this concept, this approach that the woman was just talking about to prevent someone else later in the meeting from appropriating that idea as their own.

Karen Catlin: I think you've been in tech a long time, and I'm sure you spend a ton of time in meetings, but we see this happening a lot. Every woman I talk to in tech has had this happen to her where she has said something. She thinks it's a good idea, doesn't go anywhere, and then someone later on in the meeting says the same thing, and they get all the credit, so I think that this notion of amplification is really positive, and it doesn't just have to happen within a group of women. It can be anyone at that meeting amplifying someone's idea, even if it's later on. Like let's say, Melinda, you say something in a meeting. It doesn't go anywhere, and then later on, someone says the exact same thing.

Karen Catlin: If I notice that and if I should, if I am trying to be a good ally, if I notice that I can say, "Yeah, great idea. In fact, I really liked it when Melinda brought it up earlier in the meeting," something, some little phrase like that, not to be disrespectful, but just to set the record straight.

Melinda Byerley: Yeah, and it goes on social media. I remember reading somewhere that men were more likely to have their words shared, and so I campaigned for this a lot on Twitter as well, which is, just simply retweet women. Just, or people of color, or anyone with less privilege than you. I do this as a white woman. I do it with people of color. I do with transgender people. Anyone who's got less privilege, just retweet them. Just give them, share your audience with them. It's a huge help.

Karen Catlin: Yes. Yes. Another thing that I experienced, and this goes back to our original conversation about joining Adobe, when I first joined Adobe, my new manager was a senior vice president who had been at Adobe for a

long time and was part of, I'll call it the old guard. Everybody knew him. He knew everything. As my new boss, I remember sitting in a meeting with him and other engineering leaders, and I heard him say, "What I learned from Karen is the following."

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

Karen Catlin: It caught me off-guard. First of all, because what he then went on to say was not exactly what I had told them in the one-on-one we had had a couple days earlier, but it was similar, but he rephrased it into what I'll call Adobe-speak.

Melinda Byerley: Yep. He reframed-

Karen Catlin: Right?

Melinda Byerley: ... it for you. Yep.

Karen Catlin: He reframed it. I learned, I learned how to speak, because he was basically telling me and sending this very strong signal, "You talked about this, and this is the way I'm talking now about it in this big room meeting," so, "What I learned from Karen is this," and he reframed it, but also-

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

Karen Catlin: ... by doing it, you see what happened?

Melinda Byerley: Oh, the influence. He signals to the whole room that you have his ear.

Karen Catlin: Yes, that I have his ear, but that also that he respects me, because he learns something from me. Right?

Melinda Byerley: Good point. He's not afraid to say, "I learned something."

Karen Catlin: Right. Right, and give me credit, so my credibility, not that we could measure it in the moment, but I know my cred score just went way up at that point.

Melinda Byerley: Did all the heads swivel and look at you at that point?

Karen Catlin: I don't remember. I wish like ... I'm glad I remember this story, let me tell you, because I think it's such an awesome best practice. Again, whether

you are an SVP or you're just starting your career and you have some privilege, you can use that phrase of, "What I learned from so-and-so is all the stuff about," I don't know, "open source AI libraries." Whatever it is, you can just give someone credit for teaching you something, and have a little humility yourself that you don't know everything and that you're learning from these people, especially if those people are from these underrepresented groups in tech.

Melinda Byerley: What else would you like to talk about in the book? Is there anything else I should have asked you about?

Karen Catlin: One other chapter, which is one of my favorite, is Office Housework. Office housework is the work that needs to be done in any office setting, in any professional setting, but it doesn't really lead to bottom-line business results. The classic examples of office housework is the meeting minutes, like who's going to take the minutes for this meeting? It's office housework if it's no one's job, like if it's your job, like you're the program manager, or the project manager, or the administrative assistant, and that's your job, it's not office housework. It's your job, but when it's no one's job to do that kind of work, it tends to fall on a female employee to do it. It's not, office housework isn't just taking the minutes. It's also things like, "Well, let's set up the next meeting. Who can schedule the next meeting and find a conference room, find the time we're all available," and everyone looks at the woman in the room.

Melinda Byerley: Yeah. "Who's going to buy so-and-so a birthday card?"

Karen Catlin: Or the baby shower gift and collect money for that, but it also is more job-related too like, "Huh. You've been so good, Melinda, at training the interns for the last five summers, I want you to do it again, because you're so good at it." Right?

Melinda Byerley: Yes. Yes. Is that what that's all about? Because...

Karen Catlin: Or, "Hey, who can clean up the code comments and the formatting in the code before we send it off to be open sourced?"

Melinda Byerley: That's like washing dirty dishes.

Karen Catlin: It is. It is. Oh, my gosh, so I was teaching ally-ship at a software engineering school. I just have to tell this story. Someone, I'm going on

and on about office housework, and someone in the audience says, "Hey, I have a question. So-and-so," we'll call her Jane. I can't remember her name. "Jane tends to wash all of our mugs that are in the kitchen, and I think she actually likes doing that because it helps her deal with stress, and it helps her calm down, and just like it's a good part of her day. I think she likes doing these dishes, so why is it a problem?" I, of course, took the opportunity, I was like, "Hey, is Jane here in the audience?"

Karen Catlin: Of course, Jane was in the audience, and she raised her hand, and, "Yeah, I'm here." I say, "Jane, do you like washing the mugs?" She's like, "No. I don't like washing the mugs. I just get so stressed out because there's so many of them that I just wash them because it makes me stressed to see them. I do not like doing the mugs." The point here, I mean you brought up like it's like the dirty dishes of the technical-

Melinda Byerley: Of the code world. It totally is.

Karen Catlin: Yeah, or writing the unit tests, if you're still following that approach, or whatever it might be. Yes, so it's like, it's literally like washing the dishes, and sometimes it really is the dishes. The point about all of this is, there's research showing that women tend to get burdened with this office housework more than women, more than men, sorry, and women of color even more so. When we are burdened with doing these kind of office housework tasks, first of all, we are put in a subservient role to our peers, because they're not being asked to do it. They're not doing it.

Karen Catlin: We take, get, basically by doing this busywork, this work, we aren't doing the more impactful work that can lead to career growth, that can really impact the team OKRs, the quarterly goals, whatever. If we're taking the minutes, we're kind of a step behind the conversation in a meeting, so maybe we can't actually chime in with some killer points that we should be making. Right?

Melinda Byerley: Yes.

Karen Catlin: Just-

Melinda Byerley: Yes. Yes, that's the truth. I am that person. I cannot take notes and contribute. It's very hard.



- Karen Catlin: And contribute. Yeah. Yeah. No kidding. The ally best practice, the everyday actions for allies, is to realize this happens and to disrupt it, to say things like, "Yeah, Melinda's great at mentoring interns, but I think it's an awesome role for John, the new hire."
- Melinda Byerley: Yeah. Exactly.
- Karen Catlin: Good learning opportunity, or setting up rotations for taking minutes, or organizing the next meeting, or ordering food. Set up a rotation, actually like a signup sheet or an assignment sheet where that's going to be a rotating responsibility. As a man yourself, like notice please that when you are leaving that lunch meeting and there's like five pizza boxes that probably should get moved to the kitchens so the rest of the team who wasn't at the meeting can go dive in. Notice that that food is there, and please just take it to the kitchen yourself, and don't assume that the last woman who leaves the room will do it, because she will, but it's really not fair.
- Melinda Byerley: Any other favorites that you want to share from the book in terms of everyday actions?
- Karen Catlin: I think I'll leave it there. I think that was a lot. There's a lot more, but let's just leave it there, because I'll have to admit, I want people to read the book, too.
- Melinda Byerley: They should come and read the book. Where can they find out more about Better Allies?
- Karen Catlin: Yes, so I have a website, [betterallies.com](http://betterallies.com), and, of course, the book can be purchased on Amazon.
- Melinda Byerley: Fantastic. Karen, thank you so much for coming today. I really enjoyed talking with you.
- Karen Catlin: I had a ball. Thank you for inviting me.
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