

## Getting Ahead Tip: Lessons Learned from the Getting Ahead Community of Practice

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People have been using *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* (GA) since 2004. Over the years, GA users formed a learning community that shares best practices, results, and stories. Through this learning community, we have gathered some lessons that we'd like to pass along. These come in the form of “tips”—tips for facilitators, tips for sponsoring organizations, and tips for Bridges Steering Committees and Guiding Coalitions.

### Tip #1: On the value of stipends for GA Investigators

Sometimes in the struggle to find the funds for stipends, we may lose sight of the value that GA Investigators bring to the work on poverty in our local communities. If you are finding it difficult to locate the money for stipends and are considering not paying them or paying only a token amount, please consider these points:

- The Mental Model of Poverty that GA groups create is a concrete and accurate description of poverty as it is experienced in their community. Bridges Steering Committees and the Guiding Coalitions of the Circles Campaign can use the relevant information provided to them by GA groups to make plans and take action. These important features of Bridges and GA—learning from people in poverty and defining poverty locally—mean that our work can be applied in any city, county, state, or country.
- The work that GA Investigators do on predatory practices, the Community Assessment, and the Mental Model of Community Prosperity represents three more times that the Investigators provide key information for Bridges Steering Committees and Guiding Coalitions.
- GA grads and Circle Leaders inform Bridges Steering Committees and Guiding Coalitions about the barriers that they encounter as they begin to transition out of poverty.

Every GA Investigator earns his or her stipend, even those who do nothing with GA or those who drop out. Everyone in the group brings something that others can learn from. Someone who has a negative attitude forces people to examine their own doubts and perhaps make a stand for things they find real or important. Someone who fails serves as a lesson for those who might otherwise coast through the experience. The stipends are hard-earned and worth every penny—to the GA participant, the Bridges Steering Committee, and the Guiding Coalition.

### Tip #2: On team facilitation of GA

It is a common practice to have teams of two people facilitating GA workgroups. Training in teams has many advantages. Beyond sharing the workload, it allows one person to attend to the content and the other to attend to the process during a session. In fact, this is a proven and valuable practice for former Investigators and new facilitators to begin the process of becoming facilitators themselves.

“Tag teams” are another matter. By “tag teams” we mean situations in which two or more facilitators *take turns* doing the GA sessions but do not attend *every* session.

Getting Ahead is based on establishing and building relationships of mutual respect with and among the members of the group. A great deal of learning takes place during and between each session. Subtle changes in thinking and motivation are transmitted when people gather for a session, during the sessions, at breaks, and after the sessions. Being absent from the group experience for some of the sessions makes the tag team member a *partial* group member, and it suggests that the GA group is a less of a priority for the facilitator than it is for the Investigators.

When working in teams, the guiding principle is that every facilitator should be at every session.

### **Tip #3: On observing GA workgroups in action**

Before allowing someone to observe GA sessions, consider these points:

- GA is meant to be an agenda-free, neutral, and safe learning environment.
- During GA sessions, investigators are often engaged in deep personal explorations of their lives. Much of the learning takes place during group discussions. This draws people together and forms bonds of trust and support.
- An observer is going to have an impact on the nature of the exchanges in the group: This is a law of quantum physics, social science, and human nature.
- To sit in as an observer of a group is to turn the group into “an object of study.” It suggests that the observer is in a position of superior rank, power, and status over the members of the group.
- We know from experience that when asked if someone can sit in on a session, GA Investigators will often agree to it. Whatever the reason—ambivalence, goodwill, or pride in what the group is doing, to name but three—the observer will change the dynamics in the room.

Consider this test: Would you send observers to an ongoing meeting of a particular racial, ethnic, religious, or gender group that was engaged in potentially painful self-exploration? If not, then you wouldn't send an observer to Getting Ahead.

### **Tip #4: On creating compliant workers, clients, and students**

Getting Ahead was not designed to make compliant clients, workers, or students. And, happily, by most accounts, it turns out GA grads are something other than compliant. Finding the right words is a little tricky, but we would say that most GA grads are taking charge of their lives, eager to move on, taking action, excited about their future stories, and they are living as if their hair was on fire.