

# 14 Thinking Tools for Bridges Out of Poverty Initiatives

by Philip E. DeVol

## Theory and Practice in a Bridges Initiative

Bridges Out of Poverty workshops are known for changing the way people think about poverty and economic class. People have “aha” moments that deepen into insights that are so powerful that there is no going back to their old way of thinking. These in turn deepen into paradigm shifts that alter every aspect of their work on poverty. It is not the purpose of this paper to reiterate the basic content of Bridges but to distinguish between theory and practice in Bridges work. The practices may be varied and complex, but the theory must bring clarity to our work.

**The theory:** When individuals are under-resourced to the extent that they spend most of their time and energy trying to keep their heads above water, their daily living experience becomes dominated by the tyranny of the moment. Rather than spending time and energy building resources for a better future, their time and energy go toward trying to stabilize their unstable world, and they end up staying stuck in a life of poverty.

When institutions and communities are under-resourced to the extent that they spend too much time and energy trying to keep their heads above water, they behave in very similar ways to under-resourced individuals: They spend their time solving concrete problems using strategies that originate from the same mindset that created the problems.

The solution for individuals, institutions, and communities is to build stability and resources.

**The practice:** Bridges initiatives have a common language about poverty and matters of economic class. Bridges initiatives use the following 14 thinking tools to build stability and resources at four levels: individual, institutional, community, and policy. The goal of Bridges initiatives is to prevent poverty, alleviate suffering, aid those who are making the transition out of poverty, and create communities where everyone can live well.

Anyone familiar with Bridges will be aware of most of the following mental models. Mental models are used to help make abstract ideas more concrete and to help us remember ideas by representing them with visual images. Mental models help us learn quickly, remember longer, and apply the concepts in deeper ways. Thus the term *thinking tools*.

Mental models tend to provide our first “aha” moment and new insights that attract us to Bridges. For some people, attraction moves quickly to action. Early adopters have generated a number of programs and approaches that have become foundational to the Bridges movement. But poverty is a complex problem that demands a comprehensive approach. And therein lies the challenge. Poverty is not resolved with a single program or even set of programs, because there are so many variables. Bridges is not a program. It is a set of constructs that can be applied in many settings and in many ways.

The ensuing thinking tools can help individuals, organizations, and communities create, embed, and expand solutions.

The pattern for explaining these 14 thinking tools has these six elements:

- a. A problem statement describing how things are now
- b. A mental model representing the thinking tool
- c. The context in which the tool is applied—a description of how it fits into Bridges work
- d. Core ideas of the thinking tool
- e. Ways to use the tool
- f. Information on where to learn more

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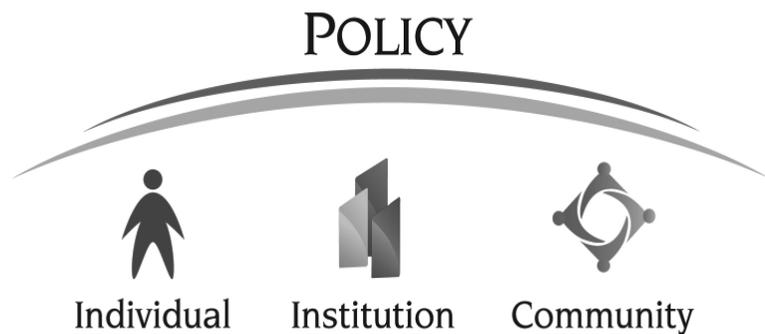
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## 1. Triple Lens

**How things are now:** Individuals learn about poverty through personal experience, stories in the news, reading, and general debate—but rarely through an intention to fully understand this complex problem. Without a structure for processing the complexities of poverty, without a way to organize our thinking, our responses to poverty will continue to be ineffective.

**Context:** The triple lens is a structure by which poverty can be assessed and processed thoroughly. Looking at poverty through a single lens—be it individual, organizational, or community—will not provide the depth of understanding that comes from viewing poverty through all three lenses.

**Core ideas:** Poverty elicits strong opinions; it's easy to take sides or to blame the other person or institution. This thinking tool helps replace judgments with understanding. The first place that conflicts usually occur is the interaction between people in poverty and people in institutions, such as caseworkers, supervisors, and healthcare workers.



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A woman in poverty saw a sign on a caseworker's door that read, "Your failure to plan does not constitute an emergency for me." The triple lens has us first analyze the dynamics between the client and caseworker, helping to explore and decode class interactions from both sides of the desk. It deepens the understanding by analyzing the driving forces of the institution and the role of the institution in the community.

By using the triple lens, we develop new ideas, discover how to apply new concepts, and make necessary changes. This tool helps us do thorough work.

As for clients who are late, it's possible that they might need to make some changes, but this tool reminds us that they don't need to change any more than those who are in the institutions and community.

### **How to use the tool**

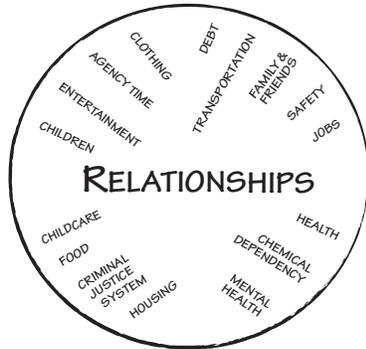
- Use the triple lens to deepen understanding of the core elements of a Bridges workshop: the mental models of class, the causes of poverty, hidden rules, resources, and language.
- When embedding the concepts in our organization or designing a new community program, the question becomes: "What would we learn by applying the triple lens?"

**Learn more:** Read *Tactical Communication: Mastering Effective Interactions with Citizens from Diverse Economic Backgrounds*, Jodi R. Pfarr, 2013.

## 2. Mental Models of Economic Class

**How things are now:** In the United States few of us know how people in other classes live. Social connectedness has been decreasing since the 1970s as income segregation in housing has separated us into economic enclaves. This has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding between/among the classes. Programs in education, health, and workforce development that are for people in poverty are more often than not designed without their input. Thus the phrase, “If it’s *about* us, *without* us, it’s not *for* us.”

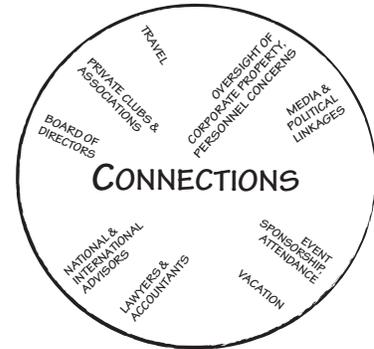
**Mental Model of Poverty**



**Mental Model of Middle Class**



**Mental Model of Wealth**



Developed by P. DeVol, 2006

Developed by R. Payne, 2005

Analytical Terms	
<b>Mental bandwidth</b>	Concrete/abstract
<b>Power</b>	Invisible, little influence/powerful
<b>Stability</b>	Daily instability/long-term stability
<b>Time horizon</b>	Tyranny of the moment/long view
<b>Problem-solving approach</b>	Reactive problem solving with relationships/proactive problem solving
<b>Financial security</b>	Daily insecurity/long-term security

Source: Philip E. DeVol, adapted from *Facilitator Notes for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*, 2020.

**Context:** These three mental models came from the first investigations people in poverty made while Getting Ahead was being created. They were quickly picked up by Bridges trainers and became icons for the understanding we have of class issues. These distinct environments arise when there is great inequality in wealth. The hidden rules arise from these environments and deepen the impact of being raised in generational poverty, generational middle class, and generational wealth.

**Core ideas:** The environments represented by the mental models explain differences in such aspects of life as driving forces, stability, power, time for abstract endeavors, time horizon, financial security, and problem-solving approaches. Poverty is experienced locally. Poverty in a Rust Belt city is different from poverty in a rural county or a prosperous, high-tech city; the barriers and opportunities will be specific to the Bridges site.

Poverty is also experienced differently by each individual according to a number of conditions and influences including race, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and religion.

### **How to use the tool**

- Learn about poverty in your community by engaging Getting Ahead investigators and graduates. They can share the results of their investigations into poverty as it is experienced locally, their assessment of the community, and their mental model of community prosperity.
- Include Getting Ahead graduates as speakers and facilitators during Bridges workshops and events, poverty simulations, and media events. Use knowledge of the environments and hidden rules to navigate new settings more skillfully.
- Use knowledge of the environments and hidden rules to navigate social settings more skillfully.
- During meetings, establish a safe setting and process so people can speak freely about hidden rules that are broken.
- Design programs so that hidden rules that break relationships are brought to light, then eliminated.
- Provide leadership training for people in poverty who want to serve on boards.

**Learn more:** Read *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, Philip E. DeVol, 2010.

## **3. Theory of Change**

**How things are now:** Problem-solving programs of any sort (workforce development, behavioral, emotional, health) require change from individuals. Change is hard, especially for those who are overwhelmed by instability and a lack of resources. Experience tells us that there are few poverty programs that are comprehensive and even fewer that share their *theories of change* with their subjects.

**Context:** The theory of change laid out in the *Getting Ahead* workbook puts all the cards on the table so that the Getting Ahead investigator can choose to use the change model—or not. It turns out that the Getting Ahead Theory of Change works for institutions and communities too. When they become unstable and under-resourced, they too tend to fall into the tyranny of the moment, and their leaders typically seek out immediate, short-term solutions when what they need is a way to break out of the tyranny of the moment.

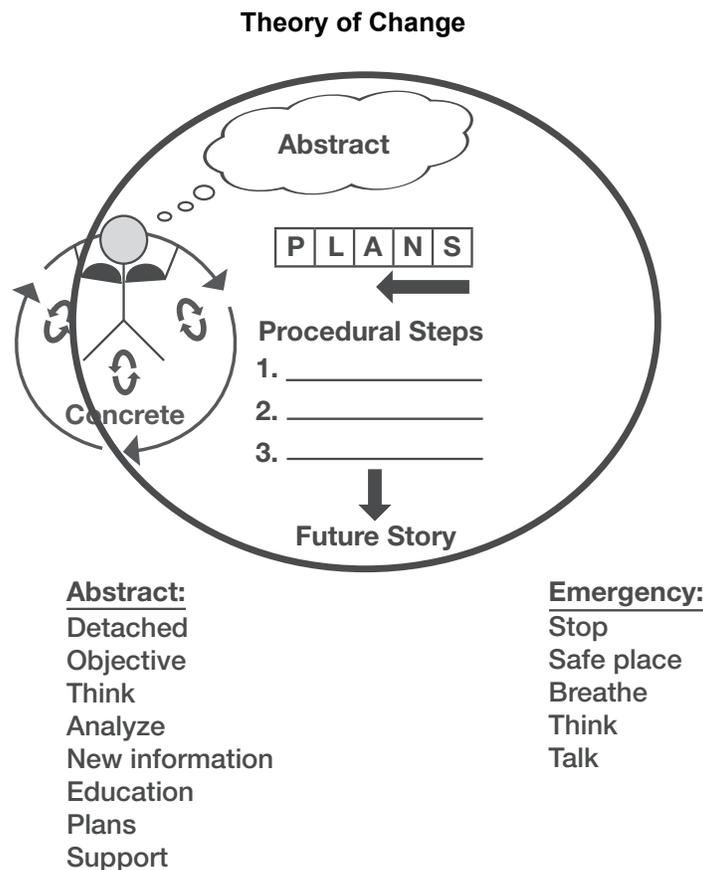
**Core ideas:** Those who manage Bridges initiatives must be experts in facilitating change because we ask for change at four levels: individual, institutional, community, and policy. Living in unstable environments will force people to spend time, social capital, and mental bandwidth to fix problems with cars, childcare, housing, safety, and food. Using reactive problem-solving skills and relationships, they fix problems on the fly over and over again, only to maintain themselves in poverty.

An institution or community that becomes under-resourced may lose sight of the long view and may attempt to solve problems by cutting staff, shifting costs to employees, cutting professional development costs, selling off assets, dropping research and development activities, failing to maintain infrastructure, cutting services, and increasing fees in order to survive. Leaders caught in the tyranny of the moment, or “short-termism,” tend to try to solve their problems using the same thinking and solutions again and again.

Getting Ahead investigators are able to use the theory of change even when living in chaos by making a conscious choice to think in the abstract and take the long view. It helps to be in a safe place, with people who share a common language and have sufficient time to devote to the process. To break out of the tyranny of the moment, one must go to the abstract, defined by the terms in the “abstract” space. Through detachment and objectivity a person can think, do an analysis that leads to finding new information, make plans, and take procedural steps that will lead to a new future story.

**How to use the tool**

- Identify the tyranny of the moment for yourself and others.
- Find a safe place and safe people where you can find the mental bandwidth to think, to be in the abstract.
- Investigate new information.
- Think outside the box or bubble that is formed by a concrete environment.

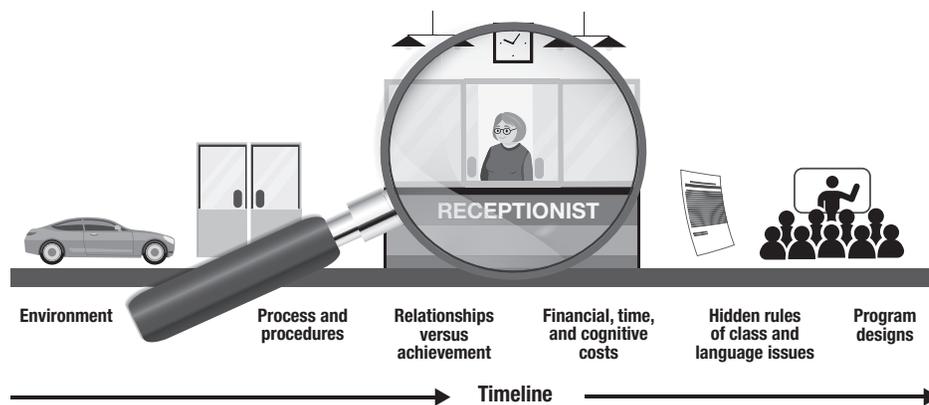


Source: Philip E. DeVol, *Facilitator Notes for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*, 2020.

## 4. Client (Employee) Life Cycle

**How things are now:** Surveys show that people in poverty go to 3–9 agencies to resolve problems and access resources in the course of a year. Organizations have standardized processes that people go through. The client experience is typically designed to accomplish the goals of the organization, based on the needs of the staff. Think of going to a doctor’s office and the routine that everyone goes through. Client life cycles are rarely designed from clients’ points of view and even more rarely from the point of view of clients who are living in unstable, under-resourced circumstances.

The Client Life Cycle examines clients’ experiences, including the first phone call, transportation, parking, entering the office, being greeted by the receptionist, orientation, educational approaches, and the design of programs from the points of view of clients, not the designers of the process. In one case, it was found that some clients were disrespected within 15 seconds of meeting the receptionist. This was due to the receptionist’s negative attitude toward people who did not speak Standard American English. She would give them “the look” when they spoke in casual register or street language.



**Context:** Staff members who are attracted to Bridges concepts can make changes in their personal interactions with clients to achieve better relationships and outcomes. However, this is often not enough to give clients the best experience because of barriers that exist in the procedures, environment, and policies of an organization. The Client Life Cycle activity is designed to identify and deal with these barriers. In this way, the burden of identifying problems and finding solutions doesn’t fall entirely on the skills of individual staff members. Employers can conduct an Employee Life Cycle activity to examine and improve the experiences of new hires.

**Core ideas:** This concept comes from the private sector, retailers in particular, who want to give their customers an ideal experience. It needs to be applied to the human service sector as well. Businesses and social services operate on middle-class rules and norms. This process identifies problems in relationship building, written materials, language disparities, the environment, and program designs that don’t work well for people in poverty. Organizations that apply Bridges concepts become innovators.

**How to use the tool:** This activity is to be done under the guidance of a Bridges certified trainer. It is done with staff members from all levels who have attended a full-day Bridges workshop and, importantly, like the ideas. Identifying problem areas can be threatening, so it’s best that problem identification comes from staff. Solutions should also come from staff—in this way, ownership of changes can be celebrated by all.

**Learn more:** Read *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* by Paco Underhill or *Reengineering Management* by James Champy.

## 5. Three Classes at the Table

**How things are now:** People in poverty are very rarely at the planning and decision-making tables, even when poverty is the issue. The middle class and wealthy have normalized their role as decision makers so thoroughly that invariably they default to taking charge automatically. This entrenched rankism is sometimes seen even in Bridges initiatives.

**Context:** People in poverty have information that is vital to planning. They have concrete knowledge of the environment of poverty, the barriers that they encounter when they navigate the systems set up by institutions, and the barriers to upward mobility that exist in the community.

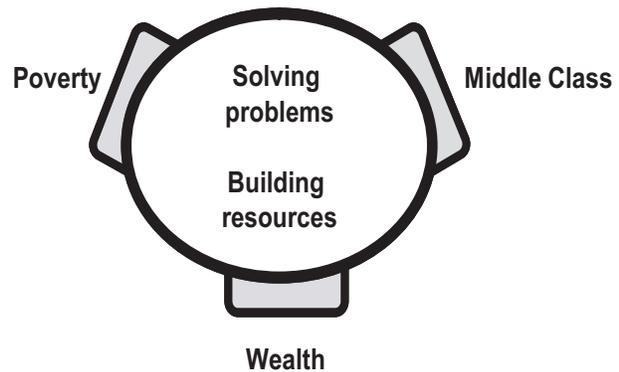
**Core ideas:** Organizers seek out, invite, and listen to people in poverty. Room must be made at decision-making tables; work, decisions, and leadership must be shared. Everyone is viewed as a problem solver and a co-creator, sometimes playing the role of a coach, sometimes of a challenger. Images of “teaching a man to fish” or “giving someone a hand up” represent the hierarchical structures of class. A more fitting image would be “working shoulder to shoulder.” Mike Saccocio of City Mission in Schenectady tells of the day that he was traveling with a Getting Ahead graduate to present to two New York Supreme Court judges when he realized that the roles had reversed: She was the leader, and his role was to drive her there.

Everyone around the table will benefit from examining their own experiences with class structures. And, if need be, recognize that they may have normalized and benefited from their societal status. Becoming conscious of rank and rankism can help people build healthy authentic relationships.

### How to use the tool

- Utilize Getting Ahead as an engagement tool. Begin engaging investigators when deciding when and where to conduct the classes. Share the work of making it a successful learning experience. Plan the graduation together and design the follow-up programs and problem-solving strategies together.
- The percentage of people from poverty at the planning table should be at least 25%.
- Provide to the people from poverty the same opportunities that you offer to anyone else to attend leadership courses, board trainings, and national conferences.

**Learn more:** Read *From Vision to Action*, Bonnie Bazata et al., 2013, and *The Power of TED—The Empowerment Dynamic*, David Emerald, 2005.



Source: Terie Dreussi-Smith, Jodi R. Pfarr, & Philip E. DeVol, Bridges Trainer Certification Manual, 2006.

## 6. Community at Risk

How things are now: The number of cities and counties that qualify as distressed is growing; middle-class stability has been shaken; the median household income has been stagnant since the late '70s; the working class is slipping into situational poverty, using safety-net resources to stay above water; and upward mobility has stalled out for most U.S. residents.

**Context:** Communities that use the Bridges constructs recognize that to address poverty effectively we must engage the whole community. This thinking tool is used to bring the distress level of the community to light.

### Is Your Community at Risk?

#### Indicators of Distress

(please check those that apply)

- Population loss
- Middle-class flight
- Young-adult children leave the community and don't come back
- Lost manufacturing
- Tax delinquencies/foreclosures
- More temporary and part-time jobs
- Rising food insecurity
- Low-income housing costs above 30% of income
- Growing number of payday lending, cash advance, pawn shops, and lease/purchase outlets
- Free and reduced lunch rates rising
- Number and value of business loans are declining
- Investment in infrastructure is declining
- Fiscal difficulties for city or county
- City or county hiring freezes or layoffs
- Deteriorating Main Street

Source: Philip E. DeVol, *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, 2010, and *Getting Ahead in Just-Gettin'-By World*, 2013, Module 8.

**Core ideas:** Getting Ahead investigators begin their work by naming the problems they face. This relevant and sometimes painful information acts as a motivator. It is used to create a discrepancy between what is and what could be—a future story. Bridges collaboratives can do the same by naming and facing the problems in a community.

#### How to use the tool

- This list of risk factors in this thinking tool is to be used to spark conversation and investigation. The community bank in Martinsville, Indiana, recognized the connection between distress factors in the community and poverty and was the catalyst for Bridges in its community and beyond.
- Utilize information generated by Getting Ahead investigators during the class: the Mental Models of Poverty, Community Assessment, and the Mental Model of Community Prosperity.
- Use Module 8 of Getting Ahead to assess the community.

**Learn more:** Read *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, Philip E. DeVol, 2010.



## 8. Community Sustainability Grid

**How things are now:** As long as our communities (and nation) are confused about the causes of poverty, our strategies to address poverty will be confused. We will be subject to the “either/or” thinking promoted by talk radio, newspapers, cable television, magazines, and think tanks with political agendas. This environment makes it difficult to hold a true dialogue about the problems and to take meaningful action at the community and national level.

**Community Sustainability Grid**  
**A Comprehensive Planning Tool for Bridges Steering Committees**

Name the Barrier:	Individual Behavior	Human and Social Capital in the Community	Exploitation	Political/Economic Structures
Individual Action	→			
Organizational Action	→			
Community Action	→			
Policy	→			

Address All Causes of Poverty

Source: Philip E. DeVol, *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*, 2020.

**Context:** The Community Sustainability Grid is based on the Research Continuum that organizes research topics into four clusters: individual choice and behavior, conditions in the community, exploitation, and political/economic structures. The grid is designed to help a Bridges initiative address all the causes.

**Core ideas:** There is good research in all four clusters. This means that Bridges initiatives can offer their communities a “both/and” approach to poverty that will attract people from all political persuasions. In other words, poverty is caused both by individual choices and behaviors and political/economic structures and everything in between, such as community conditions and exploitation.

### How to use the tool

- Identify issues to work on by listening to *Getting Ahead* graduates. They have the most relevant information on the barriers.
- Use the form to address one barrier or problem at a time.
- Name the barrier in the top left-hand cell in the table.
- Be as thorough as possible when brainstorming and selecting solutions one row at a time.
- Name the specific solution or action step, as well as the responsible person or organization.

**Learn more:** For an example of a grid that has been filled in, go to the *Getting Ahead* workbook, 2020, Appendix D.

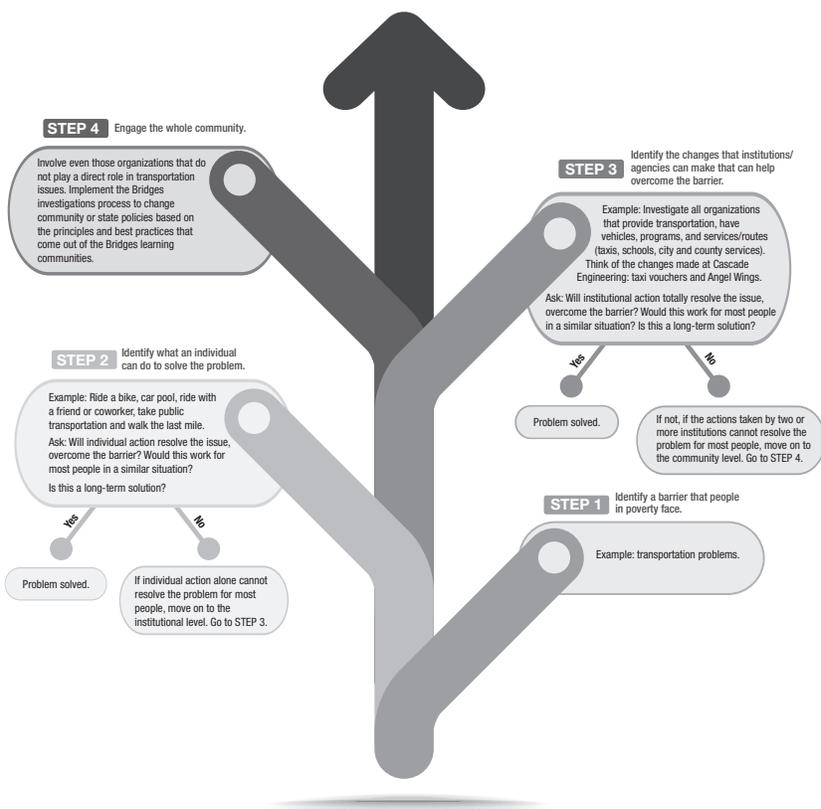
## 9. Policy Decision Tree for Comprehensive Policy Solutions

**How things are now:** Policies that pertain to those in poverty generally come from the top down. Think tanks, foundations, institutes, and corporations associated with both the left and the right have an outsized influence on state and federal policies. Think tank staff conduct studies, analyze data, and write briefing books; sometimes they write the specific language that legislators turn into laws. People in poverty are known to say, “Nothing about us without us.”

**Context:** Bridges communities that bring all classes to the table and use the Community Sustainability Grid to address all causes of poverty are challenged to develop policies from the bottom up. In other words, they need to address the barriers that Getting Ahead graduates (and others in poverty) experience during their journey out of poverty and bring them to the attention of the Bridges Steering Committee.

**Core ideas:** Bridges communities are unique in that they engage people from all classes, races, sectors, and political persuasions—they cross all divides. The relationships that participants build as they use the thinking tools described in this paper are the cement that holds them together when it comes to overcoming ideological differences that swirl around policy decisions.

**How to use the tool:** There are four branches, or steps, in the decision tree. The first branch is when the barrier is identified by Getting Ahead graduates. The second branch of the tree is when individuals do what they can to overcome a barrier (individual responsibility). If the problem isn’t solved at that level, the next branch is when institutional solutions are sought. If the problem isn’t solved at this point, the next move is to the community or state level. The higher the level, the more danger there is that decision making will default to the most powerful members and their ideologies. To inoculate against this tendency, there are four ways proposed for running what are called Tocqueville Meetings. To use this tool, all members need to raise their advocacy skills, as described in *Bridges Across Every Divide*.



Source: Philip DeVol & Eugene Krebs, *Bridges Across Every Divide*, 2018.

**Learn more:** Read *Bridges Across Every Divide* by Philip DeVol & Eugene Krebs, 2018.

## 10. Bridges Continuum

**How things are now:** In our communities today most people are looking to someone else to solve the poverty problem. We tend to look first to the individuals in poverty and the organizations that encounter and serve them (“If only   (fill in the blank)   would   (fill in the blank)   then   (fill in the blank)  ”). Some communities recognize the connection between high poverty rates and community sustainability more quickly than others. The tipping point for some of the more stable communities is when the free-and-reduced-lunch rate climbs above 40%. For more distressed communities, however, 40% would be considered an unrealistic goal.

**THE BRIDGES CONTINUUM**  
**A Comprehensive Planning Tool for Bridges Steering Committees**

	Preconception to 6	K-12	Post-Secondary	Workforce Placement	Job Retention	Self-Sufficient Wage	Seniors	Wellness	Community Prosperity
Metrics									
Fallout Costs									
Bridges Strategies									
Responsible for Action									

Source: Philip E. DeVol & Scott Miller, *Facilitator Notes for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*, 2020.

**Context:** Bridges communities are the exception to this. Instead of looking to others to address poverty, they take responsibility across multiple sectors. The growth of Bridges initiatives tends to move organically from one or two organizations that use Bridges to the collective realization that collaboration will be more effective and cost-efficient.

**Core ideas:** Rather than waiting on federal or state policies to change Bridges initiatives, capitalize on local connections and influence to take action. This tool features these concepts:

- Poverty can be addressed at every stage of life.
- Almost every sector can participate in stabilizing the environment and building resources.
- Community metrics must be identified to set reasonable goals and to serve the purpose of each organization.
- Some people are drawn to Bridges by their hearts, others by their heads. Those drawn by their heads need to see numbers. Poverty is costly; it’s not a good economic model.
- Identify the solutions offered by aha! Process and the Bridges Community of Practice.

- Successful approaches in one sector can often be adapted to improve outcomes in another sector. For example, employers have created strategies to improve retention rates. These strategies can then be adapted and used by colleges and universities to improve their graduation rates of under-resourced students.
- This tool illustrates how most organizations can be responsible for doing something to address poverty.
- Bridges can prevent poverty, alleviate suffering, and support people in transition.

**How to use the tool**

- Share this tool at all trainings; it will help people see how they can fit into the Bridges work.
- Attract people in all sectors.
- Illustrate what each sector can do and how it will benefit by joining the initiative.
- Illustrate the need for collaboration.
- Create a local version of this table.

**Learn more:** Read *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, Philip E. DeVol, 2010, and *Facilitator Notes for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*, Philip E. DeVol, 2020.

**11. ‘Getting By’ Resources vs. ‘Getting Ahead’ Resources**

**How things are now:** How poverty is defined points to what the solution is expected to be. In the U.S. the definition is based on income, so the solution must be to increase one’s income. This simplistic definition of poverty cannot address the complex causes of poverty, the lack of social coherence, or the balance between a safety net and opportunities for upward mobility. The current approach has devolved into cliff effects that destabilize people just when they most need stability. And many programs have fallen into a pattern of providing people with just enough resources to maintain them in poverty, including individuals who have one or more minimum-wage jobs.

	Financial	Emotional	Mental	Spiritual	Physical	Support Systems	Relationships/ Role Models	Knowledge of Hidden Rules	Integrity and Trust	Motivation and Persistence	Formal Register
<b>‘Getting By’ Resources</b>											
<b>‘Getting Ahead’ Resources</b>											

Adapted from J. Pfarr Consulting

**Context:** In Bridges, poverty is defined as the extent to which individuals, institutions, and communities do without resources. That concept gives everyone something to do about poverty: build resources. This tool deepens our understanding of the 11 resources by giving communities a way to think and talk about the balance between a safety net and a support system for making the transition out of poverty.

**Core ideas:** Distinguishing between “getting by” resources and “getting ahead” resources can be difficult. For example, one woman had to choose between taking a better-paying job and losing her subsidized housing. The subsidized housing, which provided much-needed stability, was a disincentive for change. She said, “It’s scary to step from a shaky safety net to a shaky ladder. Who knows if the job will be there next year?”

Institutions and funders need to determine whether they are merely bringing resources to people on the one hand or helping them build resources on the other. All of these decisions come together as a piece that determines whether or not someone can make the climb out of poverty. Communities that offer Getting Ahead must make a commitment to support people in poverty during that long, hard climb.

### **How to use the tool**

- Individuals analyze their resources during Getting Ahead classes.
- Institutions can analyze the resources they provide. St. Vincent de Paul, a national faith-based organization that has a long history of working directly with the poor, is using this tool to rebalance its approach.
- Community collaboratives can use the tool to review resource utilization and opportunities. A number of food banks are thinking about how they can “shorten the line” by addressing root causes of food insecurity.
- Funders are particularly interested in initiative-based approaches rather than needs-based funding. They have the flexibility to change how funding is allocated in ways that most fixed federal and state programs don’t.
- Use this tool to open a discussion on funding patterns. Much of the funding for poverty is designed to help people manage poverty. Those organizations often resist initiative-based funding because it threatens their funding stream and their staff. Finding innovative ways to shift some funds to support people who are moving out of poverty is a current debate. This thinking tool feeds that conversation at the local, state, and national levels.

**Learn more:** Read *Bridges Certified Trainer Manual—Institutional and Community Lenses*, 2014.

## 12. Methodology: Innovation

**How things are now:** Top-down models of *knowledge transfer* often prescribe programs that require compliance. They are not always open to innovation and are less likely to be sustainable because local adopters have taken little ownership of the concepts.

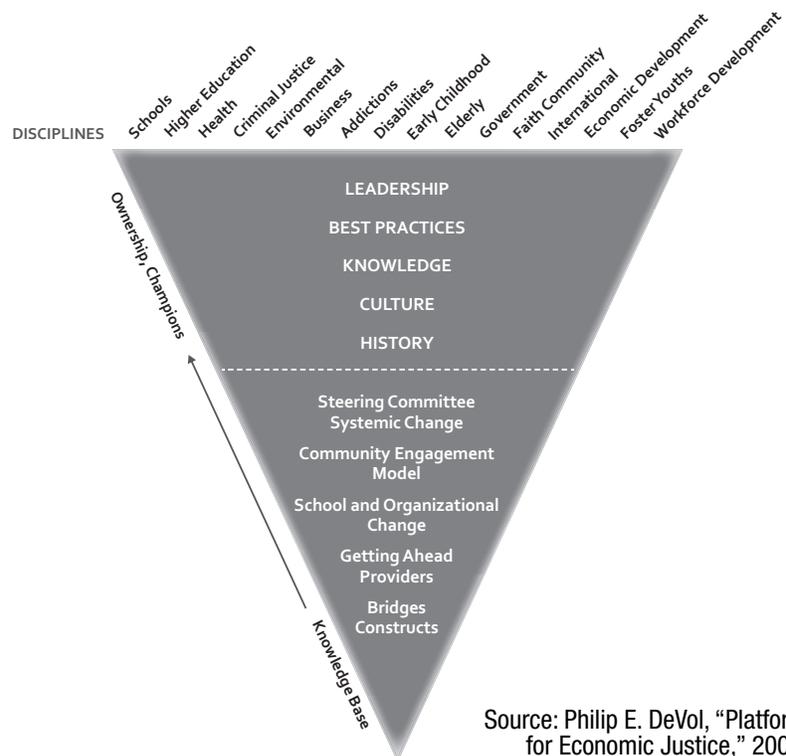
**Context:** As noted, Bridges is not a program but a set of shared constructs that can be applied in many ways. These concepts, books, and trainings come from Bridges consultants and aha! Process. People are first attracted to the concepts. But they also are attracted to the Bridges methodology, which is that individuals, institutions, and communities are encouraged to “own” the concepts, to see themselves as co-creators, and to invent new programs and strategies.

**Core ideas:** In Bridges everyone, starting with people in poverty, is viewed as a problem solver. The co-creator concept includes those around the coffee pot at particular agencies, people in the community who are also using Bridges, people from particular sectors, Bridges sites from around the country, and Bridges consultants. This natural learning process has generated a network of Bridges sites out of which has come Advancing Bridges, Inc., an independent nonprofit with the mission of building the Bridges movement.

### How to use the tool

- Bridges provides the basic concepts and some programs that appear under the dotted line in the mental model at right.
- Those who apply the concepts naturally take into account the history, culture, knowledge base, leadership, and best practices of their organization, community, or discipline. Judge Carol Robb, Columbiana County (Ohio) Municipal Court, made nine policy changes in her court that not only saved the county money but helped stabilize the lives of the offenders as well. The simplest change was to switch from specific appointment times for offenders to see the probation officer to setting a day and time by which the meeting with the probation officer must take place. This saved the county the cost of issuing bench warrants and stabilized the lives of offenders by not needing to send them to jail. Several courts in Ohio and beyond have also adopted this strategy.
- The solutions that arise from this methodology will then be relevant and sustainable. Adopting this thinking tool can open the door to the expansion of Bridges into many more disciplines or sectors.

**Learn more:** Read the article “What Makes Getting Ahead and Bridges Work?” Philip E. DeVol, 2013.



Source: Philip E. DeVol, “Platform for Economic Justice,” 2007.

### 13. Cycle of Innovation: Knowledge and Technology

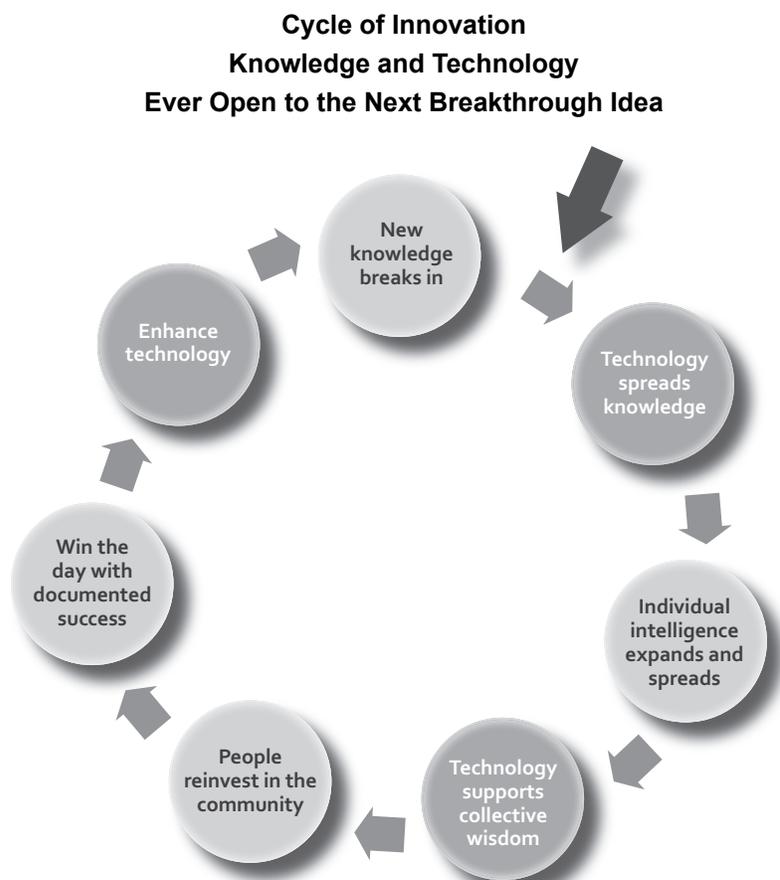
**How things are now:** Bridges sites may be creating new solutions and not have the intention or capacity to share their new ideas with others. During the process of building a Bridges initiative, individuals, organizations, and communities move along the learning continuum from novice to expert. In a learning community of so many sites, sectors, and communities, movement from novice, beginner, competent, proficient, and expert is uneven. In addition, the Bridges Community of Practice has not been formalized.

**Context:** aha! Process provides books, trainings, and consulting. In addition, it offers the learning community quarterly teleconferences for various sectors; blog posts; webinars; newsletters; an annual conference; and *From Vision to Action*, a publication of best practices. As the knowledge base grows, so does the demand for a systemic approach to managing and spreading new information.

**Core ideas:** Breakthrough innovations can occur at any time. When they do, technology can be used to spread the information from individuals to institutions and communities. Evidence must be collected and reported to ensure growth. The marriage of innovations and technology seems self-evident when looking at the rapid growth of new products in the digital world, but for people working on poverty issues, it is more remote. A structure and technology tools are needed to capture and share new, sometimes brilliant, ideas.

#### How to use the tool

- This thinking tool is designed to illustrate the random way in which brilliant breakthroughs can occur and how technology can move the new information from the individual to the community.
- It's also designed to help communities establish an intention to participate in the cycle of innovation to become champion sites that others seek out. Cascade Engineering, a plastics firm in Michigan, became the first Bridges champion by creating an approach that improved its retention rate of under-resourced workers dramatically. Cascade's breakthrough has led to more breakthroughs in the business sector.
- Bridges sites need to begin with the end in mind—that is to say, decide on a data-gathering evaluation tool and invest in technology.



Source: Jodi R. Pfarr, *Bridges Trainer Certification Manual*, 2007.

- Establish a historian—someone to document the progress, identify the innovations and Bridges concepts that sparked them, maintain a database of those trained in Bridges and Getting Ahead, and celebrate the results.
- Individual organizations can investigate the use of MPOWR’s cloud-based data management and reporting system. The full package collects data on the development of the 11 resources for Getting Ahead graduates, 15 life areas, individual case planning, and case management. MPOWR also has a Getting Ahead Module that provides data about development of the 11 resources.
- Community collaboratives can investigate the use of MPOWR across several organizations, thus creating a single plan for Getting Ahead grads or clients rather than having a plan at every organization. This provides common outcomes for all collaborative members—and access to national data from Bridges sites.

**Learn more:** Read *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki, 2005.

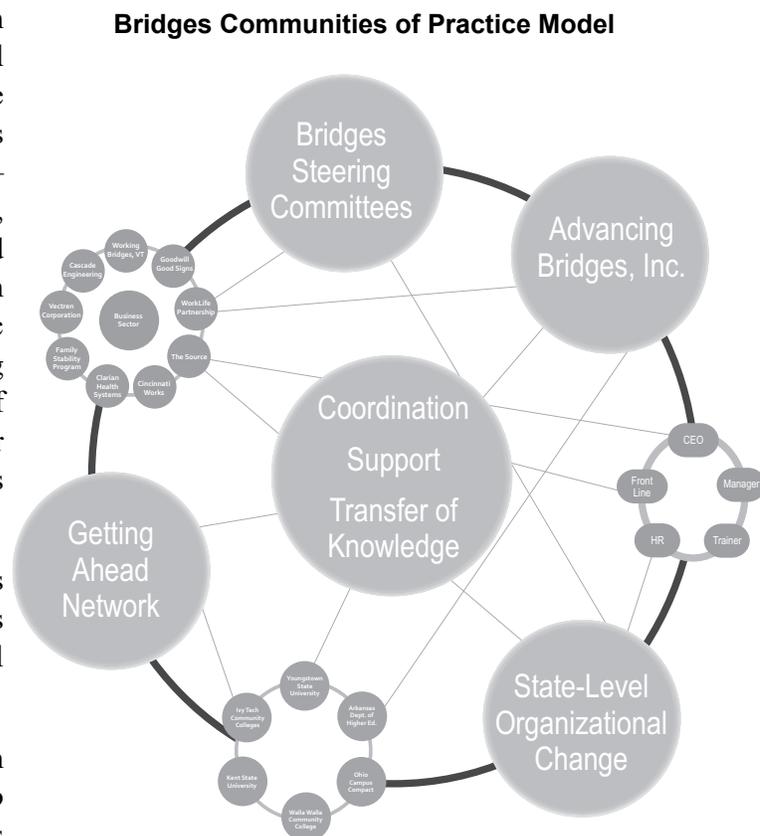
## 14. Bridges Communities of Practice Model

**How things are now:** Even though learning communities are a natural and organic way of learning, they are difficult to support when the members are from many states and sectors—and seven countries! In addition, champion sites can be overwhelmed by the number of calls they field from new Bridges sites. While the basic technology for a web-based learning community exists, the maintenance of this learning and knowledge transfer model is still relatively new and does not include all sites.

**Context:** aha! Process conducts webinars, publishes books, issues newsletters, and hosts an annual conference.

In 2013 the nonprofit organization Advancing Bridges was formed to promote and support the Bridges movement, adding another link in the learning community.

**Core ideas:** Members of the Bridges Community of Practice include individual Bridges sites, city or countywide Bridges collaboratives, statewide Bridges initiatives, and sector communities of practice (criminal justice, employers, postsecondary, Getting Ahead, health/healthcare, etc.). The lines that link



Source: Terie Dreussi-Smith, Jodi R. Pfarr, & Philip E. DeVol, *Bridges Trainer Certification Manual*, 2006.

the communities of practice are both formal and informal. The knowledge base is expanding and becoming more effective at sharing information and supporting new initiatives.

### ***How to use the tool***

- Be intentional about participating in the Bridges Community of Practice.
- Assign board members to attend community of practice teleconferences so they can report back on the latest information coming from such sectors as criminal justice, postsecondary, health/healthcare, reentry, and employer/workforce.
- Participate in multiple-site program development.
- Share best practices and outcomes through publications and websites, as well as at national conferences.

**Learn more:** Read *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*, Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, & William M. Snyder, 2002.

## **Conclusion**

Utilizing these 14 thinking tools is a form of participatory action research. People involved in Bridges initiatives learn through their investigations and the innovative ideas they put into action, using the growth of their knowledge to feed the cycle of learning. This means that individuals, organizations, and communities can benefit by applying Bridges concepts even while they are contributing to the next cycle of learning and a deeper level of impact.

Bridges has been called a movement because it grows naturally, as if on its own. People want to join because they can see that good things will happen. It is a social movement that inspires people to work together and in so doing build social capital; it is an economic movement because its purpose is to bring stability, security, and a higher quality of life. Bridges isn't a political movement, even though it must eventually influence policymakers.

Political/economic promoters offer "narratives" or a story line that presents their explanation of the past and their version of what the future might be and pit one group against another. The Bridges narrative is free of, and broader than, existing narratives because it isn't bound by the absolutes of competing economic and political ideologies. It's a safe place in the center of the community where sensible, nonpartisan dialogue guides action.

Two studies confirm that there is middle ground where reasonable people can meet to solve community problems. The studies point to what we in Bridges have already found to be true: Conservatives and progressives largely agree on many key aspects about poverty. There are Bridges sites in communities known to be very conservative and in communities that are regarded as very progressive or liberal. And we know they are all using Bridges concepts to take action on the serious problems of poverty and community sustainability.

The McClatchy-Marist National Poll survey of 1,197 adults was conducted between February 4 and 9, 2014. The other poll was designed and conducted by the Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress; it was released in January 2014.

The McClatchy-Marist poll shows that Democrats, Independents, and Republicans largely agreed that it takes even more effort to get ahead in the United States these days than in previous generations. Their responses to the question about “more effort”:

Strong Democrats	85%
Soft Democrats	77%
Just Independents	82%
Soft Republicans	77%
Strong Republicans	82%

To the question, “In this country right now, do you think people who work hard have a good chance of improving their standard of living” or “still have a hard time maintaining their standard of living,” people from all three groups largely agreed that “people still have a hard time maintaining their standard of living.”

Strong Democrats	72%
Soft Democrats	72%
Just Independents	75%
Soft Republicans	65%
Strong Republicans	58%

The findings from “50 Years After LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes About Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net” done by the Center for American Progress in cooperation with the Half in Ten Campaign, address the attitudes people have about individuals in poverty.

When asked, “Do you agree or disagree: ‘Most people living in poverty are decent people who are working hard to make ends meet in a difficult economy?’” most people agreed with the statement.

Millennials	82%
African Americans	92%
Latinos	82%
White liberals/progressives	92%
White moderates	76%
White conservatives/libertarians	66%

When asked, “Do you agree or disagree: ‘The primary reason so many people are living in poverty today is that our economy is failing to produce enough jobs that pay decent wages?’” most people agreed with the statement.

Millennials	77%
African Americans	78%
Latinos	80%
White liberals/progressives	79%
White moderates	80%
White conservatives/libertarians	76%

There is every reason for Bridges communities to take hope and energy from these findings, as well as from their own experience working with people across class and political lines. It is increasingly urgent that we become ever more effective because, frankly, it isn’t likely that the global economy will suddenly change course and start promoting stable workplace environments and more opportunities to build resources. The healthiest response in these difficult times is to work in our own communities, document our success, and create a narrative—a future story—that others also can benefit from and put into practice.

## Glossary

**Bridges Out of Poverty:** the title of the book that has been shortened to “Bridges” when referring to concepts, initiatives, and communities.

**Bridges community:** a place where there is a Bridges Steering Committee.

**Bridges initiative:** a program or approach that is based on Bridges and conducted by a single organization or collaborative.

**Bridges Steering Committee:** the people from various organizations who are using Bridges concepts and meet regularly to collaborate and expand the work.

**Common language:** shared information on environments of class, causes of poverty, hidden rules of class, language issues, resources, etc.

**Community of Practice:** a structured approach for people within a discipline or movement who intend to document and improve their practices.

**Getting Ahead:** referring to the workbook and accompanying facilitator notes, *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*.

**Getting Ahead:** referring to the program in which people from poverty graduate after taking a 12-week course.

**Hidden rules:** the unspoken cues and habits of a group that arise from their environment.

**Learning community:** a group that learns together with activities and intention but not as a formal community of practice.

**Mental models:** stories, metaphors, parables, videos, and two-dimensional drawings that represent complex abstract ideas. Also an internal picture or worldview.

**MPOWR:** a cloud-based data collection and evaluation tool provided by SupplyCore, Inc.

**Resources:** Ruby Payne’s definition of poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources”: financial, mental, social/support systems, emotional, physical, spiritual, language/formal register, motivation and persistence, integrity and trust, relationships/role models, knowledge of hidden rules.