

## How to Organize and Run a Getting Ahead Initiative

Picture in your mind a group of people sitting around a table. They are leaning forward, listening to one person talk and then another. They might be in a community center, library, church, school, or agency. On the table are their Getting Ahead workbooks, chart paper, a dictionary or two, a calculator, and lots of colored markers. On the walls are several mental models drawn on chart paper, evidence of the group's work. On a table nearby are drinks and food, and, from a room across the hall, come the sounds of their children who are being looked after by a volunteer. You have to watch for a while before you pick out who is facilitating the group. This is the typical "kitchen table" experience shared by Getting Ahead investigators.

The group meets 16 times and then has a graduation celebration. The group meets once or twice a week for two and a half hours each time. It's a "closed group," meaning all members start Getting Ahead together, and they stay together until the work is done. At some point during those 16 sessions, each of the members will have done investigations into a topic raised in Getting Ahead and reported back to the group. This could be interviews with neighbors, an online search, a meeting with the head of a local organization, or a visit to the library.

Here is a brief list of what you should consider (the details are explained more during the Getting Ahead facilitator training):

**Budget:** It's a very common tendency for middle class organizers to think, *Getting Ahead takes 16 sessions and costs about \$8,000?! I can do it in eight sessions for \$4,000.* Resist the urge! Others have tried this, and it hasn't worked. Getting Ahead is based on having a safe place to fully discuss the carefully sequenced information; half the learning is in the dialogue. Check the website for budgeting examples.

**Recruiting:** After the first workshop is completed, Getting Ahead graduates often help recruit for following work groups. At Youngstown State University in Ohio, the first group that went through Getting Ahead recruited for the subsequent groups until the course Investigations into Economic Class in America became more established at the university.

**Meeting space:** In addition to the information on a meeting space found earlier in "Description: the Kitchen-Table Learning Experience," sponsors should survey potential investigators about the meeting options. Remember, the solutions to practical problems like these often lie with the investigators themselves.

**Scheduling:** Sometimes organizers forget to ask the potential group members about when the group meetings should be offered. Most sites offer Getting Ahead a number of times.

**Supplies:** Recommended supplies for the investigators include the *Getting Ahead* workbook, legal pad, pen and pencil, calculator, dictionary, and calendar. Recommended group supplies include chart paper, many colored markers, and masking tape. Optional supplies include pipe cleaners or small balls of different textures; kinesthetic learners will appreciate them!



**Food:** Some food, even if it's only drinks and snacks, is necessary. After all, it's a "kitchen table" learning experience. Some groups provide full meals; one group served the meals on full table settings. At some sites the investigators brought in dishes on special occasions, birthdays, and graduation.

**Children:** Providing childcare is important for obvious reasons, but some sites are also providing activities for the children that are consistent with Getting Ahead content. There's a group of facilitators who are developing activities for children of different ages.

**Transportation:** This is another local issue. Sometimes it's crucial to provide transportation, while sometimes it isn't necessary at all. Knowledge of the bus routes and schedules is important.

**Facilitator support:** It's helpful to have several people trained as facilitators. Support for them can include:

- Co-facilitating the groups (both facilitators should attend every session), as it's helpful to give each other feedback
- Having meetings of facilitators to form a learning community where they can share best practices
- Connecting them to the national community of practice of facilitators through the aha! Process website

**Getting Ahead series:** Sector-specific versions of Getting Ahead are now available: Investigations into Economic Class in America for first-generation, low-income college students; Getting Ahead While Getting Out for returning citizens; and Getting Ahead in the Workplace for entry-level employees.

**Race/poverty investigations:** If the sponsor decides to use the investigation into race/exploitation/poverty, the facilitators will need to be prepared to weave those activities into the existing modules. This will add five sessions to the length of Getting Ahead and will increase the cost. The activities can be downloaded from the aha! Process website. In preparation for doing the race/poverty investigations, facilitators should attend in-depth training on cultural issues. It's crucial that facilitators examine their societal and class experience to the same degree that investigators do while in Getting Ahead.

**Reports:** Regular reports are vital for keeping people informed, as well as for honoring those who do the work.

**Monitoring initiative:** When first starting, this may not seem as important as it will later. There are three levels of monitoring to consider:

- Day-to-day monitoring, being alert to red flags, and troubleshooting
- Developing an intentional review process, with an eye toward quality improvement
- Having a "historian" record events, decisions, and key steps is something to start early. For example, when the initiative is three years old and much bigger, some members will want to know who went through Getting Ahead, who the facilitators were, and what lessons were learned along the way.



**Troubleshooting:** The motto of Getting Ahead sponsors and facilitators could be “Catch problems early.” The link between the facilitators and sponsors should be tight so problems can be addressed quickly. Part of the problem-solving process can include getting help from the author of this guide and the national community of practice.

**Model fidelity:** The sponsor, community, and facilitator need to check all decisions against the Model Fidelity checklist in Appendix 4.

**Poverty information:** Investigators and facilitators develop information about the community that is then shared with the planning and decision-making groups. These individuals provide an accurate mental model of what poverty is like locally, an assessment of the community, and a mental model of community prosperity. They also identify barriers to transition.

**Post-Getting Ahead support:** For a full discussion of this, go to the section titled “Support for Getting Ahead Graduates.”

**Sector development:** The more sectors that apply Bridges concepts, the better things are for Getting Ahead graduates. The graduates are often the catalyst for change in different sectors. In Schenectady, New York, for example, a Getting Ahead graduate so impressed a drug court judge that the judge became an advocate for Getting Ahead in other drug courts. The same type of thing happened at a hospital in Schenectady.

**Grant writing:** In communities where there’s more than one site offering Getting Ahead, collaborating on grant writing will relieve the funders from getting competing grants for the same program. The Getting Ahead website provides information on results and program designs that can serve as a template for grant writers.

**Data management:** Getting Ahead providers will have data needs based on funding sources that typically include the number of participants, demographics, completion rates, referral sources, and outcomes such as employment and education.

**CharityTracker** by Simon Solutions and aha! Process offers Getting Ahead sites an inexpensive and thorough data management system that was designed specifically for Getting Ahead. It collects data from the self-assessments done by investigators on stability from Module 2, resource development from Module 7, and return-on-investment data. Local, state, and national reports are available. CharityTracker also provides a communitywide resource-management system for any number of organizations that serve people in poverty under a separate contract.

**Research:** There have been a number of studies of Getting Ahead, and the research team doing this work agrees that Getting Ahead is progressing towards evidence-based status and is now considered a “promising practice.” This means that research has established lower levels of evidence of its success but has not yet demonstrated the higher levels of evidence.

The studies that have been completed with diverse populations across a variety of sites demonstrate that Getting Ahead appears to lead to positive changes in investigators’ poverty-related knowledge, perceived stress, mental health and well-being, social support, self-efficacy, hope, and goal-directed behavior and planning. The studies include but are not limited to:



- Dr. Beth Wahler, while associate dean for academic affairs and associate professor at the Indiana University School of Social Work, completed a national study on Getting Ahead in 2015. She has published two peer-reviewed articles from this work, including “A Group-Based Intervention for Persons Living in Poverty: Psychosocial Improvements Noted Among Participants of Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World” and “Barriers to Program Completion of a Voluntary Capacity-Building Group Intervention for Individuals Living in Poverty.” She is now at University of North Carolina in Charlotte.
- Dr. Michael Jindra, research scholar with the Boston University Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs, and Dr. Ines Jindra, associate professor in the Gordon College Department of Social Work, published “Connecting Poverty, Culture, and Cognition: The Bridges Out of Poverty Process” after interviewing Getting Ahead investigators. They also published an article titled “Poverty and the Controversial Work of Nonprofits” that places Bridges and Getting Ahead in the context of poverty work in the United States.

Visit the aha! Process website to stay current on Getting Ahead research.

**Media:** Graduation celebrations often appear in local news stories. As Bridges concepts are applied in more sectors (businesses, hospitals, courts, and schools), there will be even more to report. Building relationships with journalists in media outlets can help change mindsets and open additional doors for Getting Ahead graduates.

Graduates usually have wonderful and fresh ways of expressing themselves; they are a powerful resource for educating the public. Experienced sponsors suggest that the publicity work and training work done by Getting Ahead graduates be shared among those who are interested and capable. Utilizing the same few investigators can turn some people into “stars,” thereby unwittingly overlooking others with talent and a desire to help.

**Workplace Stability and/or Bridges training:** The core constructs that bring us together and guide our work need to be shared with others in the community. As more people are attracted to the work and begin using the ideas in their organizations, the initiative gains strength.

The initial trainings are typically done by national Bridges consultants from aha! Process. Most communities send a team to become certified Bridges trainers. Those trainers then take over the local work of developing critical mass, training new hires, and deepening the understanding of Bridges concepts.