

14 Thinking Tools for Bridges Out of Poverty Initiatives

by Philip E. DeVol



Foundational books used in Bridges initiatives.

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 old ways 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 Out of Poverty* and the other books depicted above 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, smooth the path for those who are making the journey 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, graphics, and stories spark 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.

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 a 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. See the Bridges constructs in the Appendix.

Viewing Economic Class Through the Four Bridges Lenses

This thinking tool made up of the four Bridges lenses ensures a comprehensive set of solutions.



To address most of the barriers faced by people in poverty and their communities, changes may need to be made at all four levels: individual, institutional, community, and policy.

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

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

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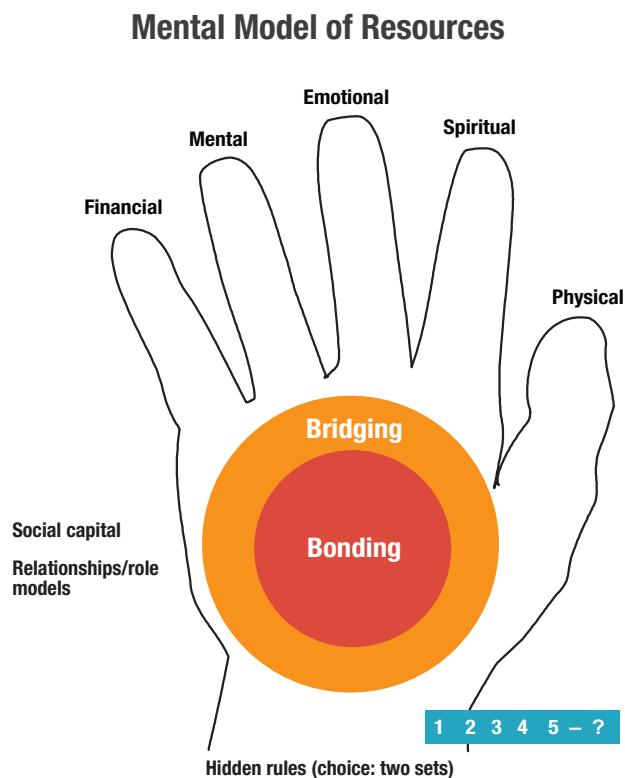
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Appendix: Bridges Constructs

1. Definition of Poverty

How things are now: There are various definitions of poverty used by academics, legislators, foundations, and social sector and religious providers. How poverty is defined shapes the strategies, programs, and solutions that arise logically from those definitions. People in poverty are the objects of programs based on their operating definitions and solutions.

There are very few sectors of our communities that are not engaged with those families. Are their foundational definitions shared with the participants? Is there a sector of society that isn't impacted by poverty? Is there a sector that can't help smooth the path for those climbing out of poverty?



Context: Bridges initiatives made up of people from all classes, races, sectors, and political persuasions share an explicit definition of poverty that every person and organization can act upon.

Core ideas: Bridges defines poverty as the degree to which an individual, organization, and community has the eleven resources (adapted from *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Payne, and *Hidden Rules of Class at Work*, Payne & Krabill) represented by the illustration of the hand. Arising from this definition, people in poverty are referred to as those who are “under-resourced.”

This definition covers the whole life of an individual and can be measured on a five-point scale. By naming and measuring these resources, individuals, organizations, and communities can take action to build resources and thereby help individuals move to a life of higher resources.

Originally, there were eight resources in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 1996): financial, emotional, mental, health, spiritual, social capital, relationships, and role models, plus an entire chapter on the importance of language. Then integrity and perseverance were added in *Hidden Rules of Class at Work* (Krabill & Payne, 2002). People in poverty who participated in the development of *Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin’-By World* also supported adding integrity and trust, motivation and persistence, and language, thus making it eleven resources.

How to use the tool: The eleven resources are depicted in different ways: charts, five-point scales, and this mental model of the hand. The “hand” is used to help people remember the resources and to illustrate how the resources weave together and interact in real life. The numbers 1–5 on the bottom right represent self-assessments of each resource. That metric is used to determine and track the journey out of poverty that people undertake in a Bridges community.

When individuals in poverty, the institutions that work with people in poverty, and the community as a whole focus on helping people build these eleven resources, the relationships between people from all classes are transformed. Bridges work is relational and systemic. It can change the culture of the community.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty* for case studies and more.

2. The Causes of Poverty

The Causes of Poverty Research Continuum

Individual behaviors and circumstances	Community conditions	Exploitation	Political/economic structures
<p>Definition: Research on the choices, behaviors, and circumstances of people in poverty</p> <p>Sample topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Racism ▪ Discrimination by age, gender, disability, race, sexual identity ▪ Bad loans ▪ Credit card debt ▪ Lack of savings ▪ Skill sets ▪ Dropping out ▪ Lack of education ▪ Alcoholism ▪ Disabilities ▪ Job loss ▪ Teen pregnancies ▪ Early language experience ▪ Child-rearing strategies ▪ Bankruptcy due to health problems ▪ Street crime ▪ White collar crime ▪ Dependency ▪ Work ethic ▪ Lack of organizational skills ▪ Lack of amenities 	<p>Definition: Research on resources and human and social capital in the city or county</p> <p>Sample topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Racism ▪ Discrimination by age, gender, disability, race, sexual identity ▪ Layoffs ▪ Middle class flight ▪ Plant closings ▪ Underfunded schools ▪ Weak safety net ▪ Criminalizing poverty ▪ Employer insurance premiums rising in order to drop companies with record of poor health ▪ Charity that leads to dependency ▪ High rates of illness leading to high absenteeism and low productivity ▪ Brain drain ▪ City and regional planning ▪ Mix of employment/wage opportunities ▪ Loss of access to high-quality schools, childcare, and preschool ▪ Downward pressure on wages 	<p>Definition: Research on the impact of exploitation on individuals and communities</p> <p>Sample topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Racism ▪ Discrimination by age, gender, disability, race, sexual identity ▪ Payday lenders ▪ Lease/purchase outlets ▪ Subprime mortgages ▪ Sweatshops ▪ Human trafficking ▪ Employment and labor law violations ▪ Wage and benefits theft ▪ Some landlords ▪ Sex trade ▪ Internet scams ▪ Drug trade ▪ Poverty premium (people struggling with poverty pay more for goods and services) ▪ Day labor ▪ Fees and fines from government and public services that unfairly raise revenue from people experiencing poverty 	<p>Definition: Research on political, economic, and social policies and systems at the organizational, city/county, state, national, and international levels</p> <p>Sample topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Racism ▪ Discrimination by age, gender, disability, race, sexual identity ▪ Financial oligarchy—the military, industrial, congressional complex ▪ Return on political investment (ROPI) ▪ Corporate lobbyists ▪ Bursting “bubbles” ▪ Free trade agreements ▪ Recessions ▪ Lack of wealth-creating mechanisms ▪ Stagnant wages ▪ Insecure pensions ▪ Healthcare costs ▪ Lack of insurance ▪ Deindustrialization ▪ Globalization ▪ Increased productivity ▪ Minimum wage, living wage, self-sufficient wage ▪ Declining middle class ▪ Decline in unions ▪ Taxation patterns ▪ Wealth-creating mechanisms

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

How things are now: Just as an unexamined definition of poverty will result in chaotic approaches to poverty, an unexamined belief in what causes poverty will lay a shaky foundation for anti-poverty programs. Under-resourced people hoping to stabilize their lives and build resources face a wide range of programs, opportunities, and barriers. Very few communities have a comprehensive approach to poverty that covers the four clusters of research depicted in the table.

At the personal level, people in poverty are sometimes seen as “the problem.”

Context: This thinking tool attracts people from all political persuasions to the work. Instead of an either/or mindset, everyone can enjoy an inclusive comprehensive both/and approach. Under-resourced participants of Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World groups appreciate the broader context, too. As one participant said: “It was a relief to know that poverty wasn’t just about me.”

Core ideas: A quick glance at the headings in the chart reveals a major problem: the politicization of poverty work. Conservatives tend to focus on research about the behaviors and choices of individuals in poverty, as seen in the first column. Liberals, focused on the other end of the continuum, tend to focus on political economic structures. This either/or thinking ignores the two clusters of research in the middle: community conditions and exploitation. The community a person lives in determines the ease or difficulty of getting out of poverty. Exploitation is a common experience for those in poverty. Without a comprehensive approach to poverty, those trying to get ahead will be poorly served.

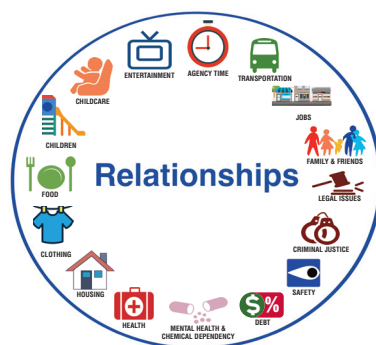
At the personal level in Bridges communities, people in poverty are seen as “problem solvers” who are needed at the planning and decision-making tables, and not just in token numbers.

How to use the tool: Bridges communities typically form collaboratives of the organizations that use Bridges concepts. These collaboratives, or steering committees, always include Getting Ahead graduates who are often the ones to identify problems and barriers such as predatory lenders, unfair fees and fines, and housing problems that they encounter as they work to build resources. This approach is not about teaching people to fish or giving a person a hand up; it’s a matter of working shoulder to shoulder to solve community problems.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*, and offer Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World to under-resourced people in the community.

3. Mental Models and the Hidden Rules of Poverty, Middle Class, and Wealth

Mental Models of Class



Developed by
P. DeVol, 2006.

Problem solvers — Problem solvers
Concrete — Abstract
Unstable — Stable
Tyranny of the moment — Long view
Financial security — Financial insecurity
Low resources — High resources
Powerless — Powerful



Developed by R.
Payne, 2005.



Developed by
P. DeVol, 2006.

How things are now: In countries that use Bridges where income inequality has resulted in segregated housing, people have lost relationships with low-wage workers and people in poverty. Social connectedness has been decreasing since the 1970s in the U.S., and we now live in 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.”

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 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 and then eliminated.
- Provide leadership training for people in poverty who want to serve on boards.

The Hidden Rules of Classes Arise from the Environments of Poverty, Middle Class, and Wealth

Hidden Rules of Socioeconomic Classes

	Poverty	Middle class	Wealth
Possessions	People	Things	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees
Money	To be used, spent	To be managed	To be conserved, invested
Personality	Is for entertainment; sense of humor is highly valued	Is for acquisition and stability; achievement is highly valued	Is for connections; financial, political, social connections are highly valued
Social emphasis	Social inclusion of people who are liked	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency	Emphasis is on social exclusion
Food	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity important	Key question: Did you like it? Quality important	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important
Clothing	Valued for individual style and expression of personality	Valued for its quality and acceptance into norm of middle class; label important	Valued for its artistic sense and expression; designer important
Time	Present most important; decisions made for moment based on feelings or survival	Future most important; decisions made against future ramifications	Traditions and history most important; decisions made partially on basis of tradition and decorum
Education	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections
Destiny	Believes in fate; cannot do much to mitigate chance	Believes in choice; can change future with good choices now	Noblesse oblige
Language	Casual register; language is about survival	Formal register; language is about negotiation	Formal register; language is about networking
Family structure	Tends to be matriarchal	Tends to be patriarchal	Depends on who has the money
Worldview	Sees world in terms of local setting	Sees world in terms of national setting	Sees world in terms of international view
Love	Love and acceptance conditional and based on whether individual is liked	Love and acceptance conditional and based largely on achievement	Love and acceptance conditional and related to social standing and connections
Driving forces	Survival, relationships, entertainment	Work, achievement, material security	Financial, political, and social connections
Humor	About people and sex	About situations	About social faux pas

Source: Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, 2005.

How things are now: Survival and belonging in these different environments require a distinct set of hidden rules of class. People raised with one set of hidden rules find it difficult to make relationships and navigate new class environments. This leads to judgments, criticism, lack of trust, and broken relationships. For the middle class, it can be difficult to fit into wealthy settings. For people in poverty, this is particularly difficult if they don't know the rules of work and school that are based on middle class rules.

Context: Studying the mental models of class and the hidden rules of class allows people in Bridges communities to replace judgment with understanding and new healthy relationships. Navigating new environments is helpful to everyone because they can now build bonding and bridging social capital across class lines.

Core ideas: Middle class hidden rules are used in most if not all community sectors such as education, health, law enforcement, and social services.

Hidden rules are shaped by race, religion, and other aspects of identity.

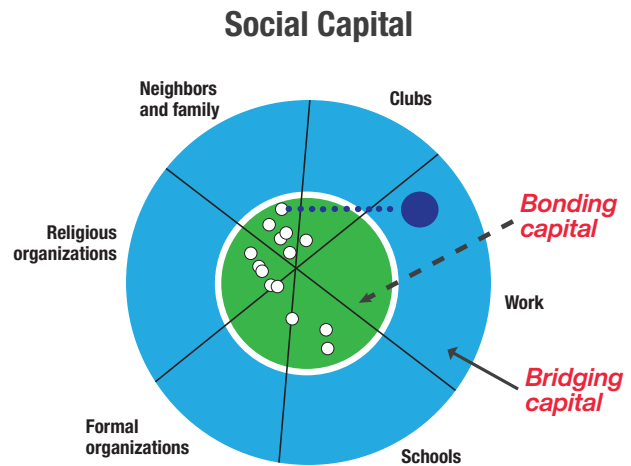
Knowledge of the hidden rules is part of the common language utilized in Bridges communities.

How to use the tool:

- Offer Bridges and Getting Ahead training in your community.
- Bring all classes and races to the planning and decision-making tables where they address the barriers faced by under-resourced partners.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*, and offer Getting Ahead in the community.

4. Support Systems and Building Bonding and Bridging Social Capital



Source: Payne, DeVol, Dreussi-Smith, Krebs, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, 2022.

How things are now: The social divide that comes with the economic divide robs us of noticing and enjoying the gifts, intelligence, humor, and personalities of people from other classes. Poverty is like a heavy hot cloud of smoke that smothers those under it. Blowing away that cloud benefits everyone.

Context: Bonding social capital (as seen in the inner circle) is made up of people much like ourselves, the people we spend most of our time with: friends, neighbors, people we work with. They are our nearest and dearest and sometimes the most troublesome. Bridging social capital comes from outside of our normal circle: people we get exposed to when we are using Bridges and Getting Ahead to name the problems and the opportunities.

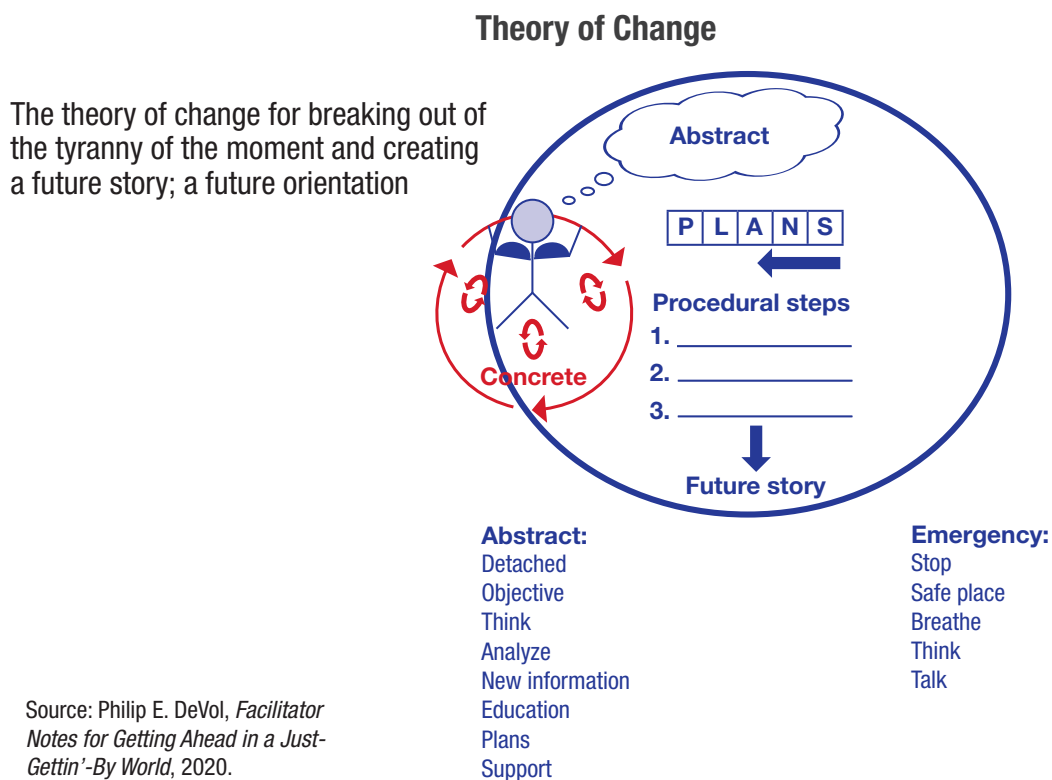
Core ideas: In a Bridges initiative we meet new people: those from across the class, race, and political divides. By attending Bridges trainings (typically how the middle class and wealthy learn the Bridges constructs) and Getting Ahead trainings (how those in poverty learn the Bridges constructs) we develop a common language.

How to use the tool: With common language, we can address the problems and barriers that people in poverty face as they begin to put their future story plans into motion. It doesn't take long for people around the planning and decision-making tables to discover that metaphors like "giving a hand up" or "teaching someone to fish" are not applicable. In Bridges communities we speak of working "shoulder to shoulder" to solve problems. There is great joy in the evolution of friendships that evolve out of Bridges work.

For people in poverty the management of relationships can be difficult. Some people we have relationships with may not buy into the changes we are making, and some may work against those changes. In that case, we have to make choices about who we spend time with and those who will go on the new journey with us. This relationship work is dealt with in detail in *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*; participate in a Getting Ahead learning experience.

5. Engaging People in Poverty and the Getting Ahead 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 is laid out in the *Getting Ahead* workbook and shared with the investigators in total transparency so that Getting Ahead investigators can choose to use the change model as they choose. Laying the "cards on the table" is respectful and acknowledges how hard it is to make a change from concrete thinking to abstract thinking.

Once investigators see how vulnerable they are to predators whose business model is based on the fact that their victims are in the tyranny of the moment, they value the importance of abstract thinking. This also changes their attitude about the value of typical educational opportunities offered by the community. Abstract thinking equals education equals a new future story.

Core ideas: This cognitive approach pulls together three elements of Bridges work: (1) relationships and knowledge, (2) the conditions and demands of the environment, and (3) the development of resources. The theory of change is the pivot point where the argument for change is made by the individuals in poverty. It's when they begin to take charge of what happens next.

Tyranny of the Moment and the Institutional Lens

Individuals	Institutions	Communities
Live paycheck to paycheck Pass up education Neglect repairs Pawn valuables Skimp on food, health checkups Work harder, under the table Compete for well-paying jobs Use benefit system	Grant to grant Cut professional development Neglect maintenance/upgrades Give up valuable programs Cut salaries, reduce benefits Reduce staff, increase caseloads Compete for grants Use bankruptcy system	Annual budget to annual budget Cut research and development Neglect infrastructure: bridges Lease assets: prisons, highways Reduce benefits and regulations Cut programs, reduce services Compete with other cities/states Use bailout system

Source: Payne, DeVol, Dreussi-Smith, Krebs, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, 2022.

It turns out that the Getting Ahead theory of change works at the institutional and community levels, too. When they become unstable and under-resourced, the leaders tend to fall into the tyranny of the moment and concrete thinking. They often seek out immediate, short-term solutions that keep their heads above water. They 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.

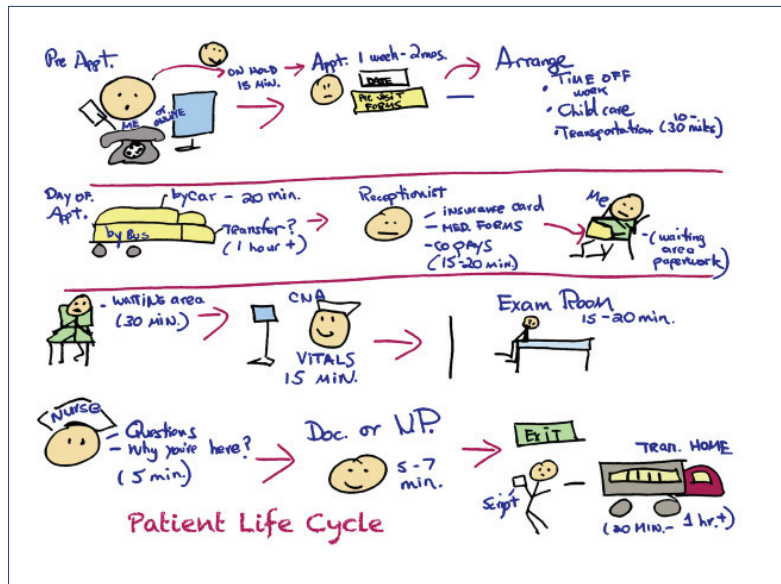
How to use the tool:

- Learn the elements of the Getting Ahead theory of change.
- 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 and to be in the abstract.
- Investigate new information.
- Think outside the box that is formed by a concrete environment.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty* and *Facilitator Notes for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*.

6. Institutional Changes and the Client/Customer/Employee Life Cycle

Customer/Patient Life Cycle: A Prototype for Every One of Our Sectors



Source: Payne, DeVol, Dreussi-Smith, Krebs, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, 2022.

How things are now: Informal Bridges 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. See the example of the patient life cycle above.

Client life cycles are rarely designed from the client’s point of view and even more rarely from the point of view of clients living in unstable, under-resourced circumstances. In one case study, 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. They were given “the look” when they spoke in casual register or street language.

Context: Staff members who use 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 are innovators from whom others in the field can learn.

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.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*, *Workplace Stability*, and *Reengineering Management* by James Champy.

7. Retrofitting the Organization

Resources Our Institution Offers

	Financial	Emotional	Mental	Spiritual	Physical	Support systems	Relationships/role models	Knowledge of hidden rules	Integrity and trust	Motivation and persistence	Formal register
'Getting by' resources											
'Getting ahead' resources											

Source: Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, 2005. Adapted by J. Pfarr Consulting.

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.

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.

Context: Bridges organizations are resilient, flexible, and committed to examine and modify procedures, programs, and policies to focus on helping clients develop "Getting Ahead" resources. If clients have already been through Getting Ahead, they would come into the meeting with this mental model already completed. Bridges organizations would be using motivational interviewing approaches and transformational models of case management. That "relational" work is at the heart of Bridges initiatives.

Core ideas: Listening to clients and engaging them in problem solving builds social capital. 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?"

Processing her situation with counselors or case workers may be the only (and important) social capital she can access. In Bridges communities, the goal is to provide the experience of being respected and connected to networks within the broader community.

How to use the tool:

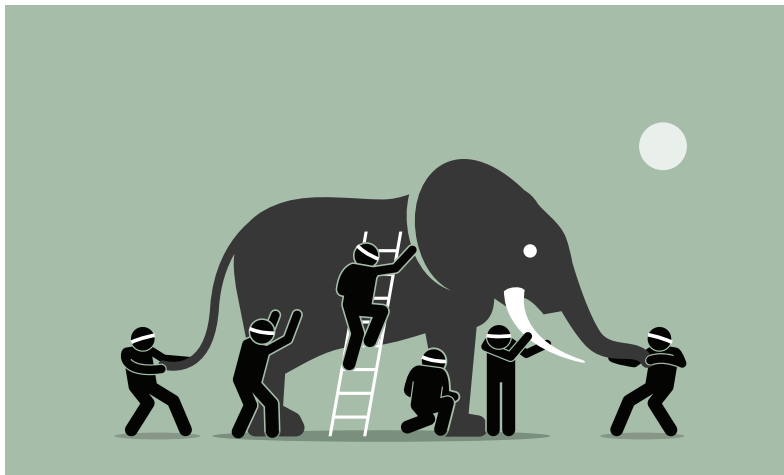
- Individuals analyze their resources during Getting Ahead classes. Have seats reserved for Getting Ahead graduates on committees and boards that deal with issues regarding resources.
- Institutions can analyze the resources they provide. St. Vincent de Paul, a national faith-based organization that 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.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*, and attend Bridges collaborative meetings and Getting Ahead graduations.

8. Building Bridges Communities

Why is it important to have a common language?



How things are now: Under-resourced people interact with almost every sector of the community: health, work, education, government, transportation, and criminal justice, to name but a few. The providers in those sectors each approach poverty from their own point of view, just as in the parable of the six blind men and the elephant. The man touching the trunk thinks it is a snake, the tusk is a spear, the leg is a tree, the side is a wall,

the tail is a rope, the ear is a fan. Unhappily for the elephant, the care and treatment it gets varies wildly.

Context: Bridges provides people from all classes, races, sectors, and political persuasions an accurate, comprehensive, and compassionate way to see poverty.

Core ideas: The common language found in Bridges, which comes from *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, includes the mental models of economic class and the hidden rules of class that arise from them. Language issues, where relationships are made and broken, are explored. Perhaps most importantly, the definition of poverty as eleven necessary resources gives individuals, institutions, communities, and policy makers comprehensive action items. Bridges offers trainings specific to different classes—for example, the Getting Ahead series for under-

resourced people and Bridges for the general population, generally the middle class and those in wealth. There are books and trainings for specific sectors: education, health, first responders, higher education, faith communities, the workplace, and corrections and reentry.

Bridges is not a program that comes “in a can.” Those who are attracted to Bridges constructs are encouraged to take ownership of them and apply them in their own organization or sector.

Every community can build a collaborative that is unique to its setting, needs, and conditions.

How to use the tool:

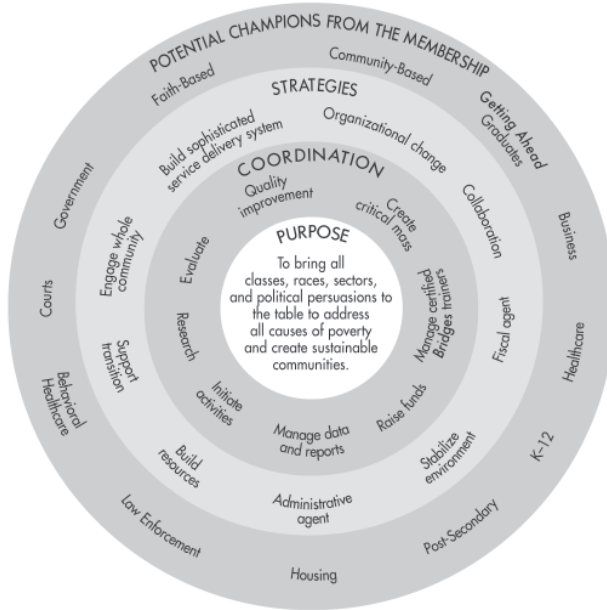
- Bring in national Bridges trainers to introduce the concepts.
- Establish a team of certified Bridges trainers to spread and embed the ideas.

- Offer Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World to under-resourced people by certified Getting Ahead training facilitators.
- Have several organizations that apply the concepts to improve their practices and outcomes meet as a learning community.
- Organize a Bridges collaborative.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*, and attend workshops provided by aha! Process trainers and/or local certified Bridges trainers.

9. Building a Bridges Collaborative

Purpose and Functions of a Bridges Steering Committee



Source: Philip E. DeVol, *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, 2010.

How things are now: There are several things that make it difficult for a community to collaborate. Here’s a short list: silos and funding streams that support them, competing agendas/problems/initiatives, partners that come and go as leaders change, short-term planning and goals, differing perceptions regarding the problems, and a lack of a common language and metrics. Finally, some

communities are so deep into the tyranny of the moment that they are busy stamping out fires that they can’t or won’t take the time to learn something new.

Context: Bridges provides a common language and tools that help overcome the barriers listed above. It is possible for every sector to achieve its goals while participating in a collaborative. Bridges is an additive to any state or national initiative.

Core ideas: It is in communities where we can have the greatest impact. It is where we have relationships, connections, local knowledge, influence, and, above all, a reason to act. It is, after all, where we live. This tool is descriptive, not prescriptive; there is plenty of room to innovate. It helps to conceptualize the work of a Bridges steering committee.

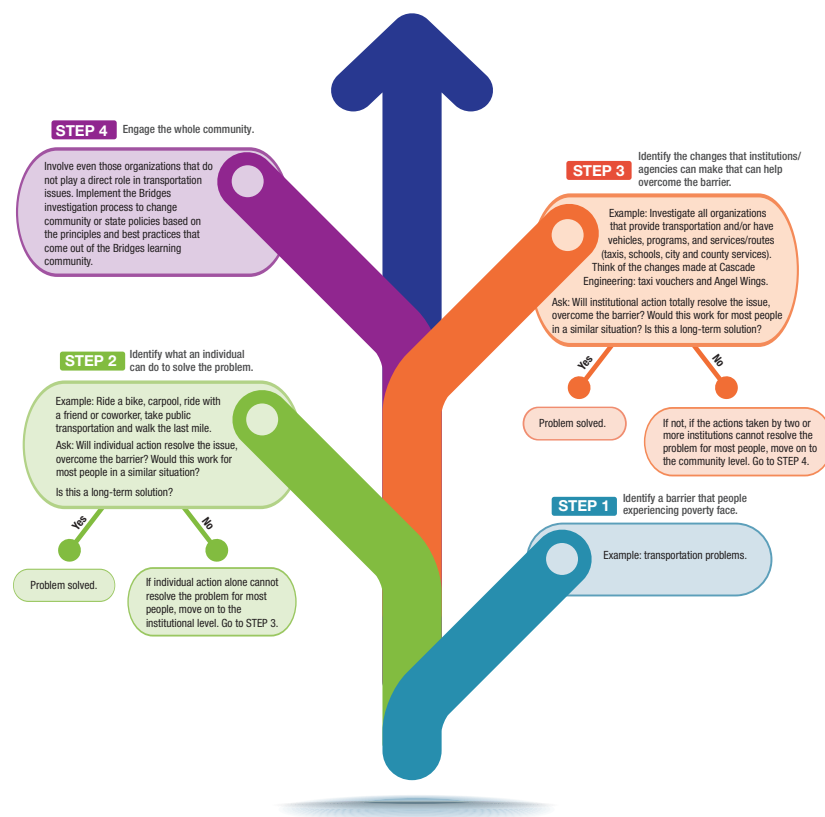
How to use the tool:

- The **purpose** in the center describes the unique features of a Bridges initiative and a suggested goal.
- The **coordination** ring describes the role of the partnering organizations. We have learned from champion Bridges sites that it is important to have a backbone organization to take the lead. In addition to the functions listed, this organization serves as the historian, the storyteller that works with the media and state and national Bridges initiatives.
- The **strategies** ring lists headings under which there would be the best practices of the member organizations. The best practices created and documented by the member organizations strengthens the learning and practices of others in the community.
- The **membership** ring lists groups such as Getting Ahead graduates, as well as sectors that are engaged in the work. It is from these sectors and organizations that best practices are developed and shared with the national Bridges learning community. One backbone organization has an enlarged version of this

mental model on its office wall. It's used to recruit board members from each of the sectors named in the outer ring.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*.

10. Changing Policies



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

How things are now: Policies that pertain to those in poverty generally come from the top down. Think tanks, foundations, institutes, and federal and state service providers have 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 have almost no voice and are known to object, “Nothing about us without us.”

Context: Bridges communities that bring all classes to the table and use the Community Sustainability

Grid thinking tool (on next page) 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 across all the 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, four 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*.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty*.

11. Community Sustainability Grid

Community Sustainability Grid

Name barrier	Individual behavior	Community conditions	Exploitation	Political/economic structures
Individual action 				
Organizational action 				
Community action 				
Policy action 				

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

Core ideas: This tool should be used by the Bridges steering committee or a policy committee named by the steering committee and made up of people from all classes, races, and organizations impacted by the problem and the policy issues.

How to use the tools:

- 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.

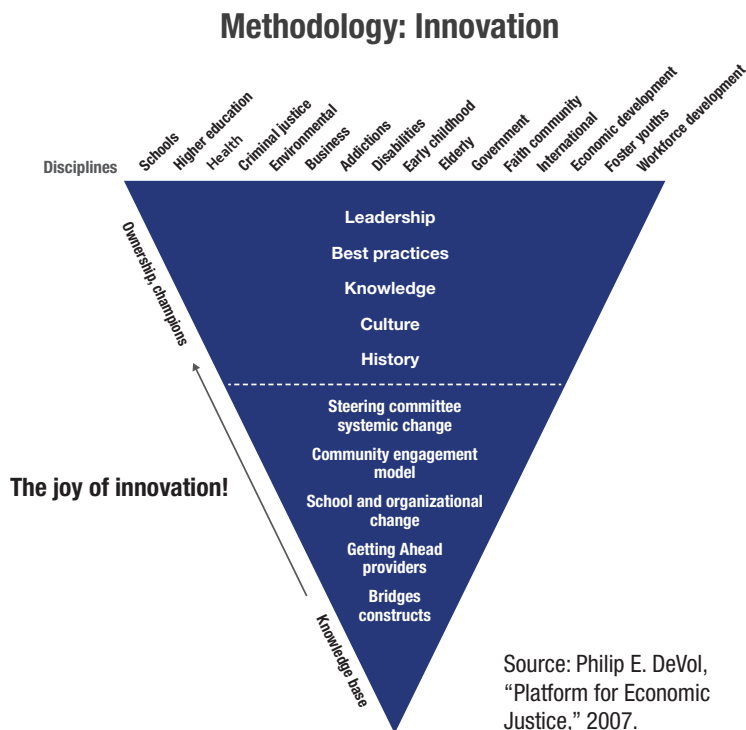
How things are now: As long as our communities are conflicted about the causes of poverty, our strategies to address poverty will be confused and contradictory. We will be subject to the “either/or” thinking promoted by talk radio, social media, cable television, magazines, and think tanks with political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

Context: The Community Sustainability Grid is based on the Research Continuum (Thinking Tool 2) 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 address one barrier at a time.

- Name the barrier in the top left cell in the table.
- Be as thorough as possible when brainstorming and selecting solutions one row at a time. Identify what individual, organizational, community, and policy action is needed to address the problem.
- Name the specific solutions and action steps, as well as the responsible person or organization.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Across Every Divide: Policy and Practices to Reduce Poverty and Build Communities*. For an example of a grid that has been filled in, go to the *Getting Ahead* workbook, 2020, Appendix D.

12. Methodology: Innovation



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 Emerge Solutions, an independent nonprofit with the mission of building the Bridges movement.

How to use the tool:

- Everything below the dotted line in the triangle is the knowledge base provided by aha! Process: its books, workshops, and trainings.
- At the top of the triangle is a list of the disciplines or sectors that can apply Bridges concepts.
- Everything above the dotted line is generated by the local Bridges initiative. They take into account the history, culture, knowledge base, leadership, and best practices of the organization, community, and sector.

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 on break, people in the community who are also using Bridges, people from various

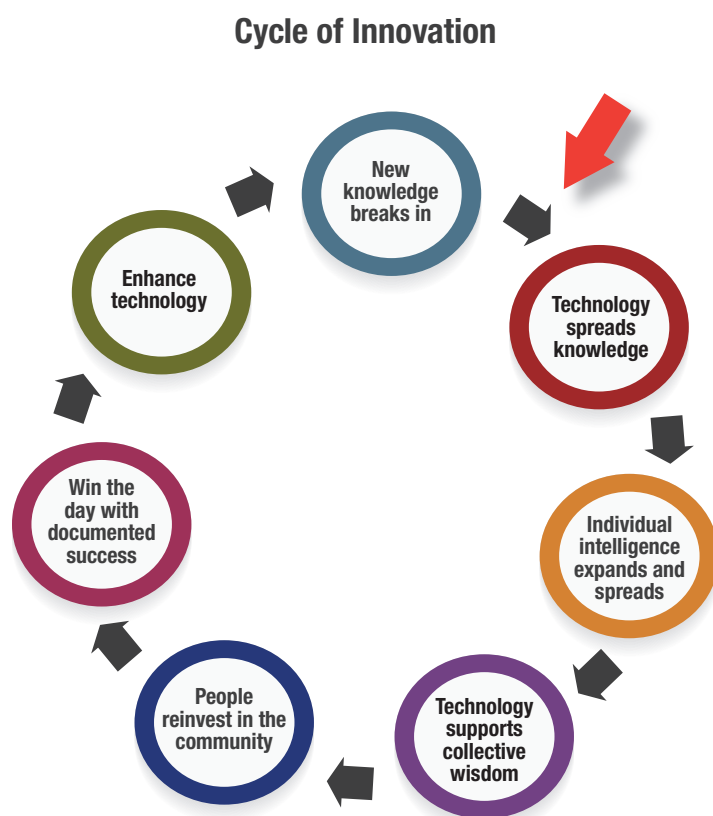
- Every person, organization, and sector is encouraged to innovate by using the core constructs. The mantra is “Everyone owns Bridges and nobody owns Bridges.” Every sector may use the ideas to develop brilliant solutions and to share them throughout the Bridges learning community. The phrase “nobody owns Bridges” refers to branding. This is a reminder to not brand Bridges to one organization or for one organization to take “ownership” of it in the mind of the community. Thus the need for a Bridges collaborative: shared ownership.
- An example of how innovation works was provided by Judge Carol Robb from Columbia County (Ohio) Municipal Court. She made nine policy changes that not only saved the county money but helped stabilize the lives of 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 at which the meeting

with the probation officer must take place. This saved the county the cost of issuing bench warrants for people who needed to work with the probation officer to arrange a time and day when they could appear. This also stabilized the lives of offenders by not needlessly sending them to jail. Several courts in Ohio and beyond have adopted this simple strategy.

- Bridges practitioners enjoy innovating and sharing their local solutions and best practices with others.

To learn more: Read *Bridges Out of Poverty* and the article “Bridges in the Courtroom” written by Judge Carol Ann Robb, available at ahaprocess.com.

13. Bridges Learning Communities



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

How things are now: “The only constant in life is change.” That observation, made in 500 BCE by a Greek philosopher, applies to poverty work today. Some have observed that changes are changing faster today than a decade or two ago. The Covid pandemic is an obvious example of that. Programs based on old conditions will not be as effective as programs based on current realities.

Context: The aha! Process response to the pandemic was immediate. Getting Ahead groups that were accustomed to meeting in person adapted to meeting virtually very quickly through the work of practitioners on the ground and technical support from the company. The change benefited people who previously were not able to be in Getting Ahead, like those in very rural areas. Getting Ahead providers in Hawaii, for example, said they could now include investigators from remote islands.

Core ideas: The Bridges learning community is encouraged to take ownership of the core constructs and to apply them, to innovate, to document the results, and to share them with the rest of the learning community. From the beginning in 1999, it has been the innovators in Bridges communities who have generated new and inspired programs. Cascade Engineering in Grand Rapids, Michigan, used Bridges concepts to improve the retention rate of new hires. That innovation led to the birth of what are now known as Employer Resource Networks (ERNs) that are spreading across the U.S.

aha! Process supports this with Zoom meetings, webinars, recorded interviews, blog posts, and articles, all dispersed through social media.

How to use the tool:

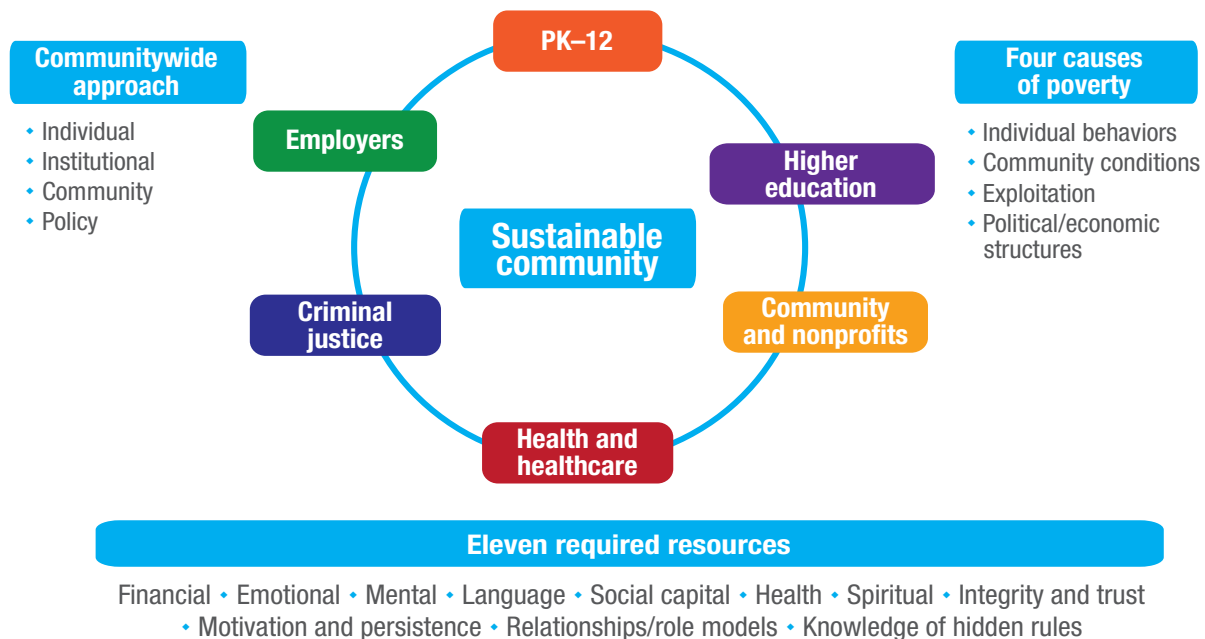
- Begin by knowing that innovations are encouraged. This thinking tool's purpose is to encourage practitioners to invent new approaches and programs. These appear random, but they are created by intention.
- Rely on people in other Bridges communities to help. For example, following the death of George Floyd, Bridges communities in Toledo, Ohio; Saginaw, Michigan; and Muskogee, Oklahoma, participated in writing a white paper titled “Community–Police Relations: Bridges Model.” First responders in those communities had much more positive relationships with the community based on two books, *Tactical Communication* and *Bridges Out of Poverty*. Two coauthors of *Tactical Communication* are police officers.
- Begin with the end in mind. Innovators should decide on data-gathering tools so the changes made are thoroughly documented and shared with other communities.

To learn more: Read *Tactical Communication* and the “Community–Police Relations: Bridges Model” white paper at ahaprocess.com.

14. Sustainable Communities Where Everyone Can Live Well

Resource Builder Model

Working across sectors to address the root causes of poverty, support individuals as they build resources, and achieve a sustainable community where everyone can live well



Source: Originally an online graphic by Ruby Payne, <https://www.ahaprocess.com/resource-builder-model>

How things are now: In 2019, the poverty rates in the 36 countries in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) show the United States with the third-highest poverty rate (17.8%), after Costa Rica (19.9%) and Hungary (17.9%). The countries with the lowest poverty rates are Iceland (4.9%), Denmark (6.1%), and Czech Republic (6.1%).

The poverty rates for the countries that use Bridges and Getting Ahead are: Australia (12.4%), Canada (11.8%), United Kingdom (11.7%), Slovak Republic (7.7%), and Czech Republic (6.1%).

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/233910/poverty-rates-in-oecd-countries/>

Context: The Bridges goal is aspirational: “Working across sectors to address the root causes of poverty, support individuals as they build resources, and achieve a sustainable community where everyone can live well.” That goal has not been met yet. And while there are some communities that are closer to the goal than others, nobody that is vested in this work would change the goal. And nobody would give up. Why? Because we see the changes in the lives of people we know. Not just those in poverty, but those in middle class and wealth, too. This is relational work. We work shoulder to shoulder across class and racial lines. It’s changed all of our lives, and it feeds our souls and brings us joy.

Among us are those who see the big picture in terms of our financial investments in the work. Here’s what two of them said about Bridges work:

“From 2009 to today [June 2018], we’ve made \$55 million in grants. The best grants we ever made were to Bridges Out of Poverty.”

—Frank Merrick, Muskogee, Oklahoma

“The program has exceeded all expectations. In the past three years, Omaha has had 591 graduates (goal 2,500/year), a 94% graduation rate, a greater than \$18,000 increase in income, a 60% decrease in debt to income ratio, and positive progress in all 15 factors of the Stability Scale.”

—Roger Howard, Omaha/Council Bluffs
Bridges Out of Poverty, Inc.

Source: Omaha CAP grant proposal

Explanation for the above: The \$18,000 at that time was the average increase in net income for all graduates who had been out of the program

for at least 12 months. That is a combination of increased incomes and decreased expenses, i.e., net cash flow (\$1,500 per month).

As for the changes made that arise from Bridges definitions, we would expect to see increased stability and a growth in resources.

The data on the changes made by Getting Ahead graduates in terms of the 15 stability indicators, the development of the eleven resources, and the financial return on investment are other measures of progress.

That information from CharityTracker is available at ahaprocess.com.

Most important are the stories told by Getting Ahead graduates. To hear their stories in their own words, check out their videos on the aha! Process YouTube channel.

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 and by 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, they 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 policy makers.

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 pits 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.

Appendix: Bridges Core Constructs

1. Use the lens of economic class to understand and take responsibility for your own societal experience while being open to the experiences of others.
2. At the intersections of poverty with other aspects of identity (race, gender, physical ability, age, etc.), address inequalities in access to resources.
3. Define poverty as the extent to which a person, institution, or community does without resources.
4. Build relationships of mutual respect.
5. Base plans on the premise that people in all classes, sectors, and political persuasions are problem solvers and need to be at the decision-making table.
6. Base plans on accurate mental models of poverty, middle class, and wealth.
7. At the individual, institutional, community, and policy levels, work to establish the environment, remove barriers to transition, and build resources.
8. Address all causes identified in the four areas of research into the causes of poverty.
9. Build long-term support for individual, institutional, community, and policy transitions.
10. Build economically sustainable communities where everyone can live well.