

What Makes Getting Ahead and Bridges Work for individuals, institutions, and communities

by Philip E. DeVol

Not long ago I had the occasion to speak about Getting Ahead (GA) and Bridges at a school reunion. I was forced to distill my thoughts on the remarkable things that have happened during my 16 years with aha! Process. I especially wanted to convey how individuals, institutions, and communities make such good use of our ideas and what attracted them to our work in the first place. Coming up with examples was pretty easy.

For example, most of the breakout sessions at the annual Bridges conferences are led by people sharing best practices. I could also go to the journal *From Vision to Action* to read about the impact that people were having in eleven communities. And as I traveled the country I listened to people tell about their experiences with our work. I've concluded that there are two things that attract people to Bridges: the content of the message itself and the method by which people are encouraged to apply Bridges concepts.

Attraction to the Getting Ahead and Bridges' concepts:

Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* has been a mind changer for years -- her company is aptly named aha! Process. Ruby's description of the hidden rules of economic class, her definition of poverty, and the emphasis she puts on language issues are the springboard for the Bridges work. And over the years a number of authors and national presenters have contributed to the body of knowledge with the mental models of economic class, information on the causes of poverty, an awareness of rankism and other "isms", a tool for analyzing the difference between "getting ahead and getting by" resources, and the Triple Lens approach (please note that I am not describing *all* the concepts that people find so compelling; there isn't room for that in this blog!). The additions have deepened the Bridges content and attracted more people to the work.

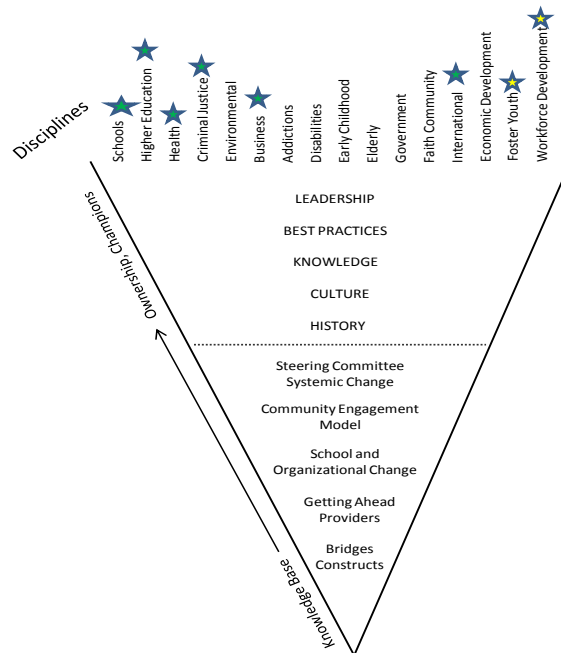
Attraction to the Getting Ahead and Bridges' methodology:

I think people are as much attracted to Bridges for the methodology as they are for the content. To apply Bridges' concepts successfully, it takes a paradigm shift in both spheres.

Our methodology is founded on the paradigm that everyone is a problem solver and a potential innovator. This is built into the DNA of Bridges and Getting Ahead. Audiences are encouraged to innovate at three levels - individual, institutional, and community - and are introduced to Michael Fairbank's statement, "Innovators are often not the principal agents of change; early adapters are."

In GA, investigators create their own future stories and join people in middle class and wealth to build resources and overcome institutional and community barriers. I've seen the eyes of GA graduates light up as they talk about taking charge of their lives, just as I've seen the eyes of executive directors and community leaders light up at the idea of their institution or community having a big impact on poverty.

In 2007 we used the following mental model to represent the idea that we are co-creators of the new strategies and programs that are being developed across several sectors.



This model represents the elements of a community of practice that generates co-created solutions: below the dotted line are the core concepts and offerings from aha! Process, without which nothing would have grown. Above the line is where people from various disciplines innovate using the Bridges' concepts. The solutions have to be local so they can take into account the knowledge and best practices of the particular discipline, the history and conditions of the community, and the leadership skills of the catalysts. The stars denote the disciplines that have already established a community of practice. The methodology is based on these principles:

- ▶ Everyone is a problem-solver who may eventually become a creator.
- ▶ People come to Bridges through attraction, not coercion.
- ▶ People take ownership of the concepts and apply them in their organization or community.
- ▶ People share the results and their stories so that other institutions and communities can benefit.
- ▶ Everyone participates in the learning community.

People are naturally energized by the invitation to contribute to a growing body of knowledge that will make a difference in their communities.

How did we come by the Community of Practice Model:

I wish I could say that there was a grand vision behind the development of Bridges, but there wasn't. At the outset we did not intend, predict, or plan for what has occurred. But as individuals, institutions, and community collaboratives began to apply our work in unique and exciting ways, the learning community began to explode.

Along the way we've seen the great results from Cascade Engineering, the first Bridges Steering Committee in Springfield, Ohio, and the first national conference in Columbus, Ohio. Now there are communities of practice in a growing number of sectors. The latest development is a non-profit organization called Advancing Bridges, Inc., whose purpose is to build the Bridges movement.

This spontaneous and exciting pattern of growth is taking place at community and state levels just as it did at the national level. Just recently Deborah Price from Oklahoma told me of seven organizations that are attracted to Bridges and want to begin Bridges initiatives. On that list are regional food banks, the police, department of corrections, Oklahoma University, Boys and Girls Club, Mommy Care, and the Dallas regional office of the FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation). As Deborah puts it, “The seeds have been planted and they are beginning to sprout.” As you can imagine, the potential for growth can be exciting and perhaps overwhelming.

The level of interest and energy for Bridges that they are feeling in Oklahoma and that you might be experiencing demands a higher level of support by and for the Community of Practice. Aha! Process has been publishing, training, managing websites, coordinating the annual conference, and expanding the use of Bridges and Getting Ahead. Add to that the capacity of Advancing Bridges, Inc. to respond to grant opportunities, build partnerships with national entities, and educate policy makers and you’ll see a future story in which Bridges concepts begin to impact the national discourse on poverty.

I would like to know through your thoughts on these issues. What attracted you to Bridges? How has the creative process worked in your organization or community? What do you think makes Bridges and Getting Ahead work? And how is the Community of Practice Model working for you?