

## Description: The Kitchen-Table Learning Experience

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, flipchart 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 GA investigators.

The group meets 16 times, then has a graduation celebration. The group meets once or twice a week for 2 ½ 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 GA 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.

To create this scene you need to know these things about Getting Ahead:

**Meeting space:** Conduct Getting Ahead sessions in a safe, agenda-free, and respectful setting. Some buildings represent power and authority. They may hold bad memories and evoke negative feelings. Having Getting Ahead where a caseworker may peer in the window to check on attendance isn't a good idea either. Exceptions to this are prisons and jails. Ideally, investigators from drug courts and domestic violence shelters can attend Getting Ahead meetings in community settings with people from other referral sources. If not, perhaps people from the community can be invited to GA at courts or shelters.

The best solution is to have central sites for Getting Ahead where several organizations can send referrals. That provides diversity and is more cost-effective than each organization running an agency-only Getting Ahead.

**Group size:** Eight years of experience tells us that the group size should be between 8 and 12, but no fewer than 6 and no more than 12. We've learned that about half of the learning in Getting Ahead comes from the content, and half comes from the discussions. Too few people will limit the variety of ideas and input; too many limits the opportunity for everyone to be heard. The closer the group size is to 12 the better.

*"The things I have learned in this course are not everyday lessons. They are not common sense. The average person has no idea about the world we live in. Now I am teaching my children so they don't experience what I went through. Once you know, you know, and you can never see the world the same way again."*

—Tanavia Hodges, College Student

**Recruiting:** Getting Ahead is for just about anyone who is living in an unstable environment and/or is living in poverty. In Appendix 1 you will find an orientation document that can be used when interviewing potential investigators. It describes the program and gives them something to take home.

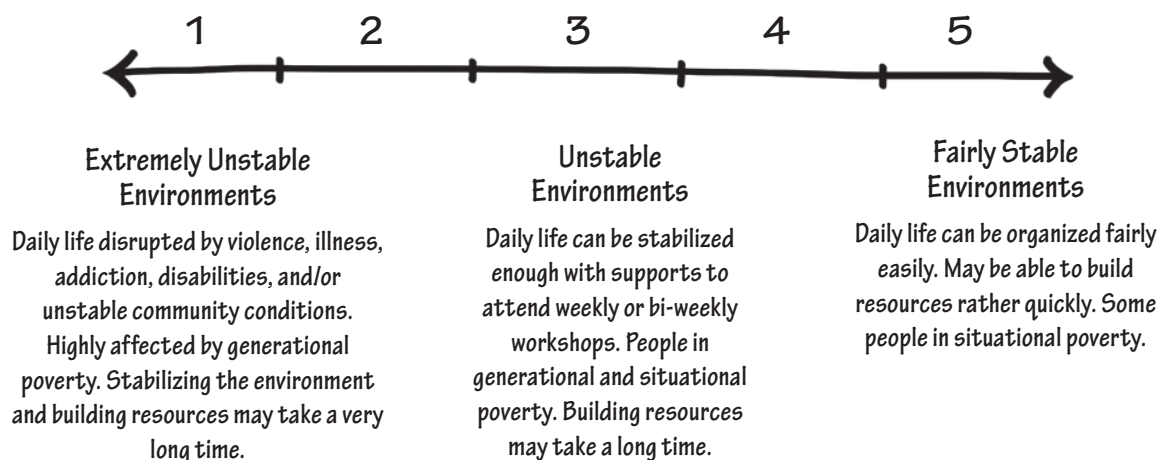
During the recruiting and selection process outlined in the orientation document, you will meet with and select the investigators for Getting Ahead. You also will give them an orientation on what to expect in Getting Ahead workgroups.

When the group you've selected meets for the first time, you'll be working on Module 1 in the GA workbook. You'll do introductions, take the lead in developing group rules, and move to the first activity, all in the first 30 minutes.

Here are some points to consider when recruiting:

1. The more diversity in the group the better. Recruit men and women, old people and young, individuals of different races, and most importantly invite people who are experiencing the different levels of poverty and instability.
2. Some people will be attracted to GA because investigators are paid for their work (GA run in prisons and drug courts would be exceptions). This means that sponsors cannot be sure of the potential investigator's motivation. Are they coming for the money and little else? Happily, motivation for attending GA is seldom an issue because GA is for people who are not motivated, as well as those who are. It's where people often find their motivation.
3. Don't use coercion. Forcing someone to attend GA is not consistent with the premise that people in poverty are problem solvers, partners, and people with vital information.
4. Some people aren't ready for GA and should be encouraged to consider GA another time. They include:
  - a. People whose lives are so unstable that they cannot hope to attend every session
  - b. Those who have drinking, drug, or mental health problems that would interfere with their participation
  - c. Those who would frequently disrupt the work of the group
5. Married couples: Experience tells us that the best strategy is to have a married couple attend different groups. Even the happiest couple needs some space to be individuals, to speak freely, and not have to worry what their spouse might think. In GA we talk about giving up relationships for achievement. Sometimes this might apply to the couple, and it would make for very awkward moments for everyone.
6. The continuum below illustrates the range of people who become investigators. On the left side are those who are living in very unstable conditions and may be in generational and persistent poverty. At the other end of the continuum are people who may be in near poverty or situational poverty. Their resources may be higher, and their situations may be relatively stable.
7. Experience tells us that recruiting people with similar situations has drawbacks. For example, if the group is made up entirely of people with

### Continuum of Those Who Take Part in Getting Ahead



subsidized housing where there is a built-in disincentive for raising one's income, the group may not challenge each other to pursue future stories if it would put their housing at risk. On the other hand, if people with subsidized housing were in diverse groups, their thinking might be challenged, and they might decide to pursue their dreams. GA graduates tell us that one of the most difficult things they have done is to give up subsidized housing to build the life they really want.

*"There are many services that feed people and provide material assistance. But I wanted to be involved in relationships that sustain dignity and mutual support. I wanted to participate in a discovery process that changes lives. The past 15 weeks have not only been fascinating discussions, but we have had fun. I have learned as much in this group as everyone else! We all feel proud of our accomplishments."*

—Jay Wall, GA Facilitator,  
Billings, MT

8. Recruiting most of the participants from the stable end of the continuum can be tempting, particularly if the sponsors are driven to produce return on investment (ROI) results. Select-

ing investigators who can easily be placed in jobs or schooling will generate evidence of savings to taxpayers and of the individual's self-sufficiency. The more stable a person's situation and the higher the resources, the easier it is to apply the information in Getting Ahead and use the supports provided by the community.

As much as we value and celebrate those results, there are four reasons why we should recruit from the whole continuum:

- a. First, as we've already noted, the more diversity in the group the deeper and more relevant the learning. If co-investigators hear only from the stable end of the continuum, they would miss an important part of the story.
  - b. Second, by selecting for success we misrepresent poverty and mislead people about what it takes to get out of poverty.
  - c. Third, with Getting Ahead we want to tell the whole story of poverty and help people along the entire continuum, not just those who can respond the most readily.
  - d. Fourth, there's a long history of middle-class people taking advantage of programs that were designed for people in poverty (Diller, 1999, p. 118). We don't want Getting Ahead to be diverted from those who need it most.
9. The GA completion rate is about 75%. People drop out for different reasons; they get jobs or move, or there is a crisis that makes it impossible to attend. Most sites recruit more than 12 people, expecting that one or two might not be able to actually attend.

## The Process: How It Works

Many of the things that make Getting Ahead work would be invisible to casual observers. After all, they would be seeing people sitting around a table drawing mental models, doing activities in their workbooks, and talking. The following pages explain the rationale behind what occurs in the workbook and everything it takes to set up and run a GA initiative. It's a description of the GA model for those responsible for it—namely, sponsors, facilitators, funders, and community collaboratives, such as Bridges Steering Committees and Guiding Coalitions in Circles® initiatives.

Many things about Getting Ahead are unique. The following five features describe what differentiates Getting Ahead from other curricula written for people at the lower end of the economic ladder. The unique features are identified in five charts that ap-

pear before we move into the module-by-module instructions. Those charts are:

- a. Unique Features of the GA Learning Experience
- b. Unique Features of GA Contributions to the Community
- c. Unique Features of Bridges Structures and Operations
- d. Unique Features of Community Support Based on the Bridges Model
- e. Unique Features of GA Content

Facilitators and sponsors may use these charts to plan, monitor, and evaluate their GA initiatives. They can serve as reference points to steady your thinking and focus.

### 1. Unique Features of the GA Learning Experience

#### UNIQUE FEATURES

Getting Ahead is agenda-free. Investigators make their own arguments for change.

Getting Ahead facilitates learning. GA is based on the concept of co-investigation, where investigators and the facilitator learn together.

About half of the learning in Getting Ahead comes from the content and half from the discussions.

Getting Ahead has two story lines: the personal story and the community story.

#### BRIEF EXPLANATIONS

Investigators are not told or forced to change or comply. This approach differs from the “righting reflex” of many middle-class organizations and individuals who try to change or fix things (make them “right”) for people in poverty.

Facilitators don't do for investigators what they can do for themselves, and they don't decide for investigators what they can decide for themselves.

The more diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, situational and generational poverty) at the table, the richer the dialogue. Getting Ahead provides a relevant, respectful, challenging, safe, and empowering experience.

Poverty is never just about the individual; it occurs in communities that have varying resources, access, opportunity, support, and leadership.

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## UNIQUE FEATURES

Getting Ahead addresses relevant economic class issues and uses life itself as the principal context for education.

Getting Ahead uses mental models so investigators can contribute to the body of knowledge and learn quickly, without overreliance on the formal register of language.

Key concepts in Getting Ahead are sequenced and reinforced throughout the 10 modules.

The personal “My Life Now Mental Model” conceptualizes the discrepancy between what life is like now and what life could be.

## BRIEF EXPLANATIONS

Getting Ahead deals with the realities of political/economic structures that contribute to and exacerbate poverty. GA trusts the investigators to analyze their situation, to solve problems, and to transform their world.

Investigators, regardless of their literacy skills, can contribute to the learning experience by participating in discussions and the development of mental models.

Investigators have several opportunities to deal critically and creatively with the harshest realities of poverty.

The discrepancy between what life is like now and what it could be creates the cognitive dissonance that can be the foundational catalyst for change.