

Prodigy Ventures: Using Modern Apprenticeship to Realize the Exceptional Abilities of Youth

Stephanie Frances

Four years ago, I and a team of workforce development educators founded Prodigy Ventures on the conviction that every young person is prodigious, regardless of background, education level, or natural talent. Each has an exceptional ability to deeply affect this world and participate fruitfully in the new economy. But most are not achieving their potential. After a decade in the world of workforce development and public education, we realized that the way this country “does” education and employment is broken.

Education structures are outdated (created for an industrialized nation), largely ineffective (employers rank high school graduates as “woefully unprepared” for the workplace, and 40 percent of employers can’t find employees with much-needed skills) and irrelevant (most schools don’t resemble the real world in environment, culture, or norms). And employers aren’t filling the gap (only one-fifth of employees report getting on-the-job training from their employers in the past five years, and employers are more likely to hire outside talent than to develop talent from within). Add to this, employment practices in the US are deeply inequitable (youth unemployment among black, Hispanic, and First Nations young adults is nearly double that of white young adults). All of this encourages disengagement, and it leaves our country vulnerable as we train a new generation for the new economy.

The health of our city and of the country’s workforce and education systems hinge on the hidden talents of our young adults. At Prodigy, we believe in the upside-down country—one that recognizes greatness in all young people (especially those on the margins) and that flips traditional structures and dismantles silos.

We need an innovative, upside-down process to activate those talents. Prodigy’s team has been deconstructing these questions: How will we activate young talent, talent that our traditional paradigms aren’t activating? What alchemy will we use? What circumstances will unlock this talent?

Prodigy believes there is a significant opportunity within the apprenticeship model to fill a gap in this education-to-career ecosystem. Through apprenticeship, education and employment are interwoven to create a vibrant landscape of learning spaces and a new generation of workers with deep investment and transformational skills. This intentional design sees the workplace as a ripe structure for accelerated learning and sees deep learning and deep work as inherent motivators for employees. Within these apprenticeships, young adults can discover their greatness while learning skills for the new

workforce, in an accelerated timeline. As we crafted our apprenticeship model in Denver, Nicholas Wyman was articulating this sentiment in his book *Jobs U: How to Find Wealth and Success by Developing the Skills Companies Actually Need* that “apprenticeships [are] our best weapon in the war to reduce unemployment, rebuild the middle class, and restore America’s status as a leader on a global economic scale.”



Photo courtesy of the author.

Prodigy is both an employer (we operate a craft coffeehouse in Denver) and a talent development entity (we use apprenticeship to help young adults, especially those on the margins, build foundational skills and mind-sets to become transformational leaders and sustain meaningful careers).

Founded in 2015, Prodigy Ventures is a network of social enterprises where the best of instructional strategies and cognitive psychology are infused into an intentional workplace culture. Young adults disconnected from school or employment are invited into apprenticeship as humble learners of life, self, and craft within a high-standards enterprise. Here, they discover their inherent greatness and the power to go forth and enrich their city. Our first enterprise, Prodigy Coffeehouse, opened 2016 in Globeville-Elyria-Swansea. The enterprise is run by 18-to-24-year-olds who have little or no work experience and no craft coffee skills when they begin. We use best practices in intrinsic motivation, accelerated learning, and culture building to train apprentices to operate a high-quality enterprise.

The program's impact has been encouraging. Ninety percent of small businesses fail within the first three years, but Prodigy's apprenticeship model has thrived. On the business side, Prodigy won Best New Coffeehouse in Denver (2017) and has a consistent 4.6-star Google rating and 4.5 Yelp rating. This year, on the business side, we will generate enough internal sales to turn a profit. On the mission side, Prodigy has trained more than 100 young adults in foundational workplace skills and hired 36 to be apprentices. We are proud to have an 85 percent graduation and retention rate (despite hiring disconnected young adults with little or no work experience). And apprentices are performing. Seventy-two percent of graduates are working in career-pipeline positions, earning at or above Prodigy wages. Just last month, Simone, a 2018 Prodigy graduate, won gold at a statewide barista competition, was featured in *Barista Magazine*, and was invited to compete at the National Barista Championship Qualifiers. Other graduates have gone on to manage coffee shops, graduate from college, earn licensure, and be hired into professional, salaried positions in Denver.

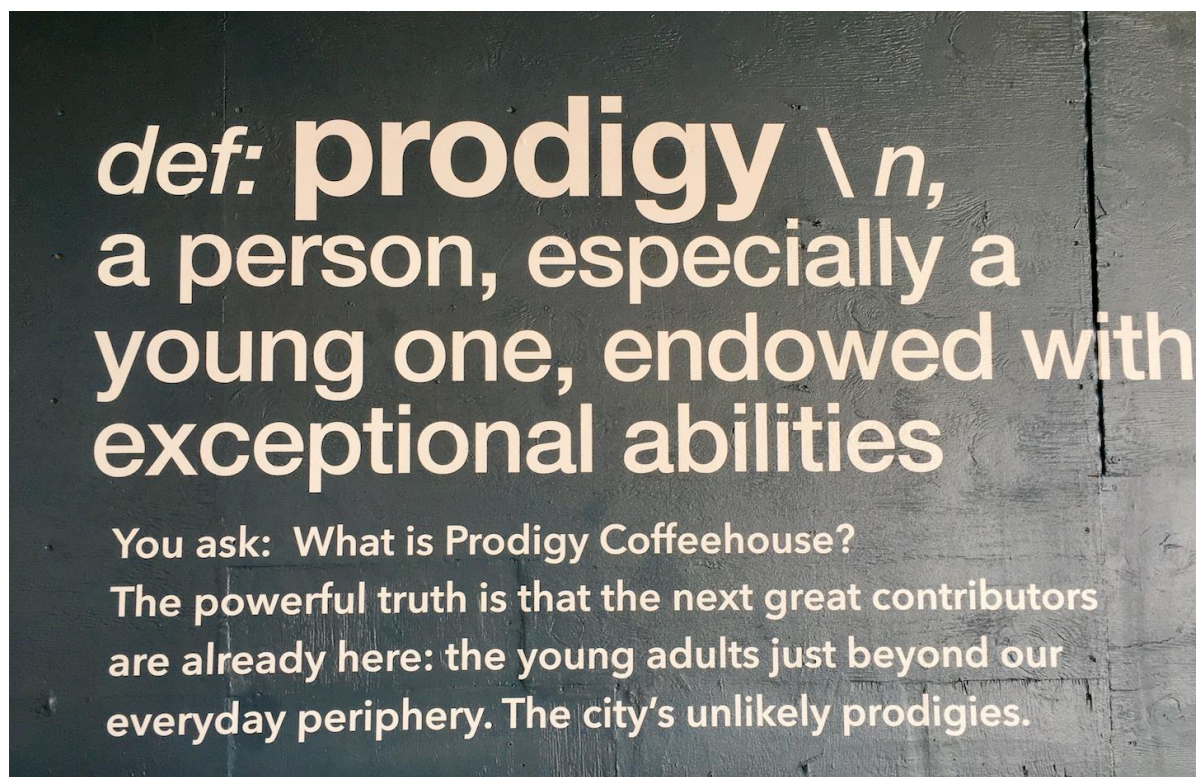


Photo courtesy of the author.

Leslie Herod, Colorado state representative for House District 8, described Prodigy this way: "I believe that Prodigy is doing some of the best work in the city for [young adults]. Prodigy's apprenticeship model brings the highest-quality education strategies into a workplace where youth are inspired to reengage in learning. I have watched youth who dropped out of high school get excited about math, science, and business through Prodigy's apprenticeship. At the same time, young adults are

learning a craft and to appreciate craftsmanship. Apprentices are gaining transferrable skills that are not just based on the needs of employers today but jobs that have not yet been created.”

Prodigy believes the journey to self-sufficiency begins and improves with meaningful work. Our yearlong apprenticeship program is designed to create personal transformation through the vehicle of a high-challenge and high-support workplace. The program includes activities that support the study of self and craft. From these interventions, we expect these young adults will build skills, mind-sets, and social and economic capital for success in the new economy.

We define apprenticeship as intentionally infusing learning strategies into a work environment to develop skills, mind-sets, and understandings that have long-term benefits for both apprentices and employers. With apprentices, we talk about it as “deep work and deep learning in a culture of healing.”

Apprenticeship done well taps into the reality that all humans are intrinsically motivated to learn. And the workplace is a ripe place for deep learning. Behavioral science research about intrinsic motivation, popularized by Daniel Pink in his best-seller *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, tells us that people, once their basic needs are met, are intrinsically motivated by autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Autonomy is the desire to self-direct, mastery is the desire for progress and high-level skill attainment, and purpose is connectedness to a cause greater than yourself. Workplace apprenticeships are ripe to activate intrinsic motivation to both work and learn. At work, we can provide the tools, resources, context, and opportunity for self-direction; the intense training for mastery of skills; and purpose, which includes building up and shaping a community, and sharing their learning with other employees.

Below, we share some of the most impactful aspects of Prodigy’s model that we believe can be transformational in any organization in any city. Here’s what it looks like on the ground.

Preapprenticeship

Prodigy’s apprenticeship program begins with a 40-hour preapprenticeship training, an intensive introduction to workplace mind-sets, craft coffee, customer experience, and exploration of personal assets. We offer preapprenticeship intensives four or five times a year to cohorts ranging from 5 to 20 preapprentices. Preapprentices receive a stipend for successful completion of each phase. After completing the preapprenticeship, apprentices are hired with pay starting at \$9 and hour plus tips (average starting wage is \$13.50 an hour). Our hiring practice is upside-down, in that we hire those who are not necessarily the most qualified. In fact, if a preapprentice can find employment elsewhere, we support that effort. Prodigy hires apprentices based on where they live (hiring hyperlocally is important to our community wealth-building efforts) and their desire for deep learning and deep work. We have

offered apprenticeships to anywhere from 30 to 100 percent of each cohort of preapprentices, depending on the cohort's makeup and enterprise's current needs.

Apprenticeship

Prodigy provides technical and applied skills training through professional development modules and in-the-moment coaching taught by educators, business mentors, and coffee experts in both classroom and on-the-job training contexts. Prodigy's leadership team consists of an executive director, a director of learning, an operations manager, and a manager apprentice. (We are currently hiring for an educator to join the team.)

- **On-the-job training.** Apprentices work an average of 24 hours a week for a 6-to-18-month apprenticeship, for an average of more than 1,000 hours of training or experience. Each shift, apprentices receive support and training from a peer leader or educator.
- **Classroom instruction.** Apprentices learn outside their barista shifts in professional development modules taught in Prodigy's community meeting space twice a month. Instruction also happens on learning excursions to partner coffee shops and roasters and during guest-barista shifts. Weekly one-on-one coaching and goal progression with our director of learning is also key to engagement and accelerated learning.
- **Internal certifications.** A series of milestones where apprentices demonstrate varying levels of mastery in coffee knowledge, barista skills, customer experience, and mind-sets to receive promotions, raises, and internal certifications, including barista 1, barista 2, shift lead, and manager on duty.
- **Industry-recognized certifications.** Apprentices have become certified, at no cost, by the Specialty Coffee Association, the American Barista and Coffee School, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, ServSafe, and FirstAid.
- **Mental health and wellness.** Preapprentices and apprentices have access to no-cost wellness and therapeutic supports individually and in groups. They attend at minimum 15 hours of wellness classes, where they are introduced to the concept of and basic tools to support mental health. During their apprenticeship, they also receive an "organic" mental health assessment and access to a year of one-on-one therapy.

Leadership Development and Management Training

All apprentices who pass the barista 1 level progress to study six transformational leadership mind-sets and demonstrate them within the Prodigy community as part of their professional development. Because Prodigy aims to reflect the population the project serves, we have developed a management

track for apprentices to grow into leaders. This intense training over two years focuses on skill development to operate a high-quality retail coffee business, start-up experience, and transferrable business, leadership, and training skills. Prodigy apprentices who have earned promotions to the shift lead level and apprentice graduates are eligible to apply for the operations manager training program. In this way, Prodigy will fulfill an exciting goal, which is for Prodigy's social enterprises to be owned and operated by apprentice graduates. In 2019, the first apprentice graduate, Odalis, was hired into a salaried full-time management position.

Job Development and Transition to Career

Apprentices have access to paid experiences such as job shadows, internships, stage shifts, informational interviews, interview strategy, and job development as they prepare to graduate from their apprenticeship. Prodigy has also developed relationships with local employers who have preferred hiring for Prodigy graduates.

We have become a talent pipeline for Denver's craft coffee industry. Because of the high caliber of training, coffee shops around town are hiring Prodigy preapprentices, apprentices, and graduates. In 2018, Prodigy's talent was hired at Blue Sparrow Coffee, Crema Coffee House, Logan House Coffee Company, Rivers and Roads Coffee, Starbucks, and Under the Umbrella Café and Bakery. Recently, the owner of a busy craft coffee shop hosted an apprentice as a guest barista. His email later that week read, "[The apprentice] just 'killed it' over the weekend. We could not have been more impressed. I know she's a key member of your team, but we'd love to make her a regular, part-time member of our team. I'm not sure if there's a way to 'share' her, but if you (& she) would be willing...we'd love to explore this further."

Another Prodigy graduate and longtime Northeast Denver resident, Simone, ignited a lifelong career path during her apprenticeship. While working as an apprentice at Prodigy, Simone earned a Specialty Coffee Association Barista Level 1 certification, and we connected her to an exclusive interview opportunity at Crema Coffee House, one of Denver's best craft coffee shops. She has now worked at Crema for a year and is a key member of its team. Only one month after her graduation from Prodigy, she won gold at a statewide barista competition, was featured in *Barista Magazine*, and was invited to compete at the National Barista Championship Qualifiers. She said about her apprenticeship, "Prodigy is the foundation for everything I know. I wouldn't have gotten hired [at Crema] if I didn't work at Prodigy.... Prodigy, for me, was finding the one thing that I cared about, [craft coffee], and can pursue professionally, and there are careers now where I can go to school. There are biologists who are going to school just for coffee. It's a huge industry. I found something that gives me a lot of room to figure out what I want to do." We are proud of Simone's commitment to craftsmanship and her ability to leverage relationships built at Prodigy.

Methodology

Prodigy's strategies are based on a combination of research and experience. Our program design and measurement tools are informed by research on the intersection of poverty and brain science. We have also adopted strategies from research on posttraumatic growth and the science of learning. Our founding team was trained at Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center. Our training protocol was influenced by the Understanding by Design framework, with elements of design thinking and the workshop model of delivery. In addition, our culture of healing is modeled after the culture at Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the world's largest gang intervention program.

Prodigy's approach is influenced by scientific research from Economic Mobility Pathways in Boston, which has built a network of economic development organizations focusing on using brain science to build pathways out of poverty. Economic Mobility Pathways and the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University explain that working memory, inhibitory control, and mental flexibility cannot fully develop in youth who grow up with acute stress caused by poverty—in a world where violence, unpredictability, scarcity, and lack of control are constants. Without these executive functioning skills, youth struggle under the tyranny of the urgent. Prodigy's training is designed to enhance executive functioning skills. The discipline to stay on task (inhibitory control), remember something that happened with a customer yesterday and apply the learning to today (working memory), and understand why a teammate might be struggling to grasp latte art (mental flexibility) are a few examples.

Learning Science

What are the constructs of the apprenticeship and work environment that set the stage for deep learning at Prodigy? First, we provide a high-quality job and high-caliber training. We pay a living wage, provide frequent paid professional development, and have flexible scheduling and a robust culture. These are integral to motivating apprentices but are not enough. We must also tap into their desire for learning and work. Five key components for deep learning and deep work, based on learning science, are built into Prodigy's learning model.

1. Clear, Relevant, and Ongoing Success Milestones

Learning requires setting clear standards and providing scaffolded teaching to help learners achieve success. High standards and high support are key. The barista curriculum is framed around a series of attainable certifications designed to set high expectations and provide opportunities for frequent raises and promotions. Each is aligned with skills needed for apprentices to experience self-worth and accomplishment as a barista, as well as foundational skills for all workplaces.

Apprentices begin on-the-job training focused on mastering the barista 1 certification. Barista 1 is scaffolded into four evaluations that build upon each other: coffee knowledge, customer interactions and point-of-sale competency (checkout shift), espresso bar skills, and professional evaluation. Apprentices work at their own pace within small peer groups, individually with identified learning resources (we have evaluation tools that are also powerful learning tools), and with our director of learning and coffee craftsman on staff. The apprenticeship scope and sequence is designed to tap into both intrinsic motivation (autonomy and mastery) and external motivation (raises and increased responsibility). From here, apprentices move onto barista 2, shift lead, and manager-on-duty certification.

2. Community of Learners

All youth, no matter what experience, credentials, or confidence they bring, begin Prodigy on a level playing field. Apprentices learn the same skills, with the same competency requirements, together. Apprentices study and execute the mind-set “I am responsible for my own growth and learning” and agree to continual growth. Together, they build a community of learners with a high level of responsibility.

Apprentices are responsible for running a high-standards coffeehouse, something they can do only in collaboration with each other. They are then provided the appropriate coaching, support, restorative resources, and paid time in the community to achieve high expectations in a high-quality business. This required collaboration is an in-demand transferrable workplace skill for the new economy.

3. Peer Teaching and Peer Learning

Teaching is a metacognitive skill that requires not only an understanding of the content but the ability to articulate the content to others, build relationships with learners, and customize teaching strategies for different personalities. This is why we show apprentices how to train and teach newer apprentices. Peer teaching and learning is associated with greater psychological well-being, social competence, communication skills, and self-esteem. It is correlated with higher achievement and greater productivity in terms of enhanced learning outcomes. Becoming a teacher also means apprentices are rebuilding the neural pathways required for metacognition, the same neural pathways damaged by the trauma of poverty and other adverse childhood experiences.

4. Time on Task and Deliberative Practice

Expertise in any skill requires a major investment of time. Researchers estimate it takes 50,000 to 100,000 hours to be a master chess player. This, often referred to as “time on task,” is essential for

mastery. But time alone is not sufficient. Mastery also requires deliberate practice, where the learner is engaged in a loop of strategizing, practicing, reflecting, seeking and using feedback, and making adjustments. In-the-moment learning is robust at Prodigy, with a three-to-one learner-to-teacher ratio. Workplaces are set up well for this. At Prodigy, apprentices work and learn for 1,300 hours (average for a yearlong apprenticeship) and interact with 74 customers each shift, providing the opportunity for rapid and deliberative practice. They experience accelerated learning.

5. Generative Feedback

On the first day of preapprenticeship, young adults learn that feedback is not their enemy. It's not a corrective practice. It even transcends the idea of "constructive criticism." At Prodigy, feedback is a natural, dignifying, and essential part of continuous learning. We give it and receive it as if it's drinking water because we care about continual learning. Our educators are craftsmen in this realm.

First, we mine for the good. We catch apprentices doing well and applying their learning, and we celebrate. Next, we focus feedback on the areas identified for their individualized learning trajectory. At any one time, a novice barista could improve upon many things. We refine feedback and focus apprentices on the next most important knowledge, skill, or reasoning needed to progress in their hierarchy of learning.

For example, Domonic might take eight minutes to make a latte for a customer, which is too long according to our standards. But at this point in his learning, we're focusing on quality, not speed.

Our operations team manages the customer experience in this situation, but on the training side, we focus feedback on Domonic's quality goals. We focus on data tracking for quality: taking the specs on milk temperatures, inputs, outputs, and taste. If those hit the mark, we celebrate. If they don't, we address it through analytical questions. But we don't compound it with negative feedback about his timing and his latte art. That comes after he has achieved a minimum quality standard.

Also, we are sensitive to situations and personalities. Feedback or redirection is sometimes best in the moment. Other times, if feedback is minor or requires a more in-depth conversation, we wait for one-on-one development time or build it into a classroom learning opportunity for the team.

How does this entire package prepare apprentices for the future of work? We teach apprentices how to be learners in the community and how to be teachers. Deep understanding of what it takes to be a learner transfers into every context of their lives and sets them up for continual mobility in the workplace.

Measuring Workforce Preparation for the New Economy

Alonzo drops out of high school to care for his single mother who slipped at Sam's Club and injured her back. He gets a job as a courtesy clerk at King Soopers, and he and his mother move into transitional housing. He reenrolls in school, but his dyslexia makes it tough. He graduates but cannot read or write above an elementary level. He finds an apprenticeship program across the street from his building and finds the resolve to learn a new trade. His reading improves. He joins a book club with his colleagues. He becomes shift lead and then manager on duty.



Photo courtesy of the author.

What we most like about stories like this is the earning power part—the part where he gets a job or finishes school or the part where he has the power to pay bills and care for his family. We believe his earning power is his ticket out of poverty. We design programs to get him that earning power.

Traditionally, workforce development programs are designed based on the belief that a certain set of skills, mind-sets, and attributes—a certain earning power—will be the difference between a life entrenched in poverty and the life we aspire to. In other words, we design workforce development

programs based on an industrialized economy that taught us that sustained input (hard work) creates a reliable output (wealth).

To be fair, the traditional workforce development model has evolved to acknowledge the underlying barriers that would make sustained input feasible. Workforce development has begun to understand the whole person and treat psychosocial barriers as economic barriers. The traditional model now includes case management alongside job placement services. We train our staff in motivational interviewing. We provide resources for child care and transportation. We talk about systemic barriers. We become trauma informed.

And yet, we still see programs modeled on the belief that our economy rewards people who can overcome barriers with a certain sustained input of hard work and resolve.

Prodigy Ventures is a social enterprise offering economic mobility to disconnected youth through coffeehouse apprenticeships in Denver. We believe in earning power and holistic care for systemic barriers. But we also believe economic mobility requires more than earning power. It even requires more than holistic care and addressing the systemic barriers in someone's life.

Since its founding in 2015, Prodigy has measured economic mobility in wider terms than earning power. Our measures have included indicators of earning power, social capital, 21st-century workforce mind-sets, and psychosocial healing. New research from the Urban Institute, Stanford University, and the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty validated our approach. This team found that economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community are essential levers for economic mobility. We welcomed a research-based framework that added to the traditional measure of economic success and have set 2019 program outcome goals to align with the framework:

Economic success. Apprentices increase earning power by building technical skills, earning industry-recognized certifications, and receiving promotions. They earn a living wage and enroll in postsecondary education programs. 2019 outcome goal: Apprentices increase earning power.

Power and autonomy. Apprentices understand their ability to wield control and influence over their lives and environments. They activate their talents. They identify long-term goals. They show growth in measures of leadership. They engage in Prodigy's mental health resources. 2019 outcome goals: Apprentices build foundational skills for the new economy, and apprentices experience healing.

Being valued in the community. Apprentices increase measures of social capital. They activate a network of professionals outside their immediate circle of family and friends. They believe they are needed. They experience belonging. 2019 outcome goal: Apprentices increase social capital.

By adding power and autonomy and being valued in the community to our evaluation plan, we ensure that economic mobility does not depend on earning power alone.

Economic mobility can no longer be an inside job. It can no longer be about people managing their own bootstraps, removing their barriers, and getting on with their life. We must create workplaces that explore what power and autonomy mean to young people who grew up in systems that marginalized their families and prescribed minimum-wage jobs. We must create workplaces that explore the meaning of belonging. Belonging that means more than team building. It cultivates and maximizes each person's unique abilities.

Throughout his apprenticeship, Alonzo has trained at least 15 new apprentices. As manager on duty, he is responsible for the coffeehouse on Sundays. He troubleshoots customer issues, is accountable for sales goals, oversees training for new apprentices, and ensures they meet individual goals. He makes decisions and can provide a rationale for each. He rectifies the point-of-sale and cash drawer at the end of the night. He presented with a team of Prodigy apprentices to a global audience at the Global Homeboy Network gathering in Los Angeles last year. He's received 4 raises in 18 months.

Alonzo is proof that economic mobility depends on more than earning power. He reminds us that workforce development programs must respond to a new economy, an economy that requires independent agency while maintaining a sense of belonging. He shows us what we should measure.

Culture Development

We work alongside young people who have, in many cases, experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences, deep pain they are grappling with as they transition to adulthood. Stereotypes of these young adults in the media are negative. But in most cases, instead of transmitting this pain to others, we see that young people are capable of transforming their pain into productivity and hope. And we see this every day at Prodigy. We hear things from apprentices like, "Prodigy is more than just a job. It's a place where anyone from everywhere can come in and feel at home. It's a positive workplace that is less like a job and more like a family." And, "Prodigy is what I like to think of as a sanctuary...and we want our customers to feel that way as well."

I believe Prodigy's "secret sauce" is found in our culture. We have modeled our culture on that of Homeboy Industries, the world's largest gang intervention organization. Theirs is a culture of healing, driven by founder Father Gregory Boyle, grounded in the concepts of mutuality and kinship, best summed up by the notion that "if we have no peace, it's because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." Boyle's book *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* had a profound influence on Prodigy's founders, and we have since deepened our study of Homeboy's work over the past 30 years.

Building our culture at Prodigy is a simple journey. We don't have a list of organizational values we teach. We don't outline dos and don'ts for how to act. We introduce one concept to apprentices on day 1: spiritual hospitality. This concept is what we strive to embody, and it drives our actions, words, and intentions. Although Prodigy is not a religious organization, we have embraced this idea described by theologian Henri Nouwen in his book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*.

“Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.” Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.

At Prodigy, we describe spiritual hospitality in this way: “We create space for people to be authentically and fully themselves.” When we introduce this concept on day 1, across the board, apprentices resonate deeply with this idea that teaches this: I, in my authentic self, matter. And you, in your authentic self, matter equally. Our goal is to create an environment for each other and for customers that embodies this.

“How would you greet this customer?” I ask the eight new apprentices during their first professional development at Prodigy Coffeehouse. On the screen is a picture of an elderly woman wearing a cat sweater covered in cat hair. She's holding an orange tabby cat. The apprentices consider for a moment. Julian, a young man who tells us he was raised “between the trap house and the church house” considers this customer. He rubs his face, takes a breath, and articulates his greeting: “Good morning, ma'am. Now who do we have here? Would she like a dish of steamed milk?”

We celebrate Dre's suggestion. Other apprentices offer conversation starters about their own cats or suggest she choose the sunny table in the corner because “cats love sunshine.” We move on to other customer prototypes: a businessman with a briefcase, a mom with kids hanging off her hips, a lady from the suburbs, an elderly man with a cigar in his front lapel.

Two young black men from the neighborhood, Jalen and DeAndre, walked into Prodigy Coffeehouse in summer 2018. Michael, an apprentice on shift that day, treated these strangers to his genuine, loving welcome. We don't remember Michael's exact words and can't reduce it to a science, but somewhere between being pumped full of the best hot chocolate they had ever had (their words), DeAndre and Jalen experienced spiritual hospitality. That day, they applied to be apprentices. When asked why they were drawn to Prodigy's craft coffee apprenticeship, both pointed to Michael's welcome

the first time they set foot in the shop. They felt they belonged. They found a place where they can be fully and authentically themselves. Who they are and what they have to offer is recognized for being enough. Because, well, it is.



We intentionally *do not* use the term “customer service.” Apprentices are not here to serve people. The traditional way our country views customer service, where the customer, the one with the money, is always right, and the worker is here to serve them is not aligned with our culture. Instead we flip this concept. Rather, we talk about customer *experience* and view it as an opportunity for empowerment. Apprentices embrace the idea that they have the power, behind the counter, to affect people. They have the power to create a work environment and customer experience where people feel honored, valued, and cared for. In a recent preapprenticeship training, they developed their own customer experience vision statement: “At Prodigy, we want you to feel special, as if you are surrounded by seahorses, and butterflies land on your nose.”

In addition to informing customer experience, spiritual hospitality extends to how we treat employment and education in the apprenticeship.

Spiritual hospitality is the difference between a supportive work environment and a transformational work experience for everyone involved. Like many nonprofits, we begin by extending it in our outreach methods. Who you are and what you bring to the table is enough. Do you have

previous experience in one of the country's fastest-growing craft coffee scenes? Do you have previous experience in hospitality? Do you have a clean record? Do you have a diploma? None of that is needed.

Do you have a willingness to learn and grow? Do you value yourself and others? Are you willing to throw around terms like “authenticity” and “love”? Do you understand that you have power to affect others? Are you ready to jump headfirst into something new, maybe foreign, and exciting? Are you ready to take yourself and your future possibilities seriously? Now you're talking.

What happens quickly and consistently is that apprentices begin to return the same spiritual hospitality to one another.

Veteran apprentices welcome, teach, mentor, and guide “newbies” into the world of craft coffee and self-exploration. Our team maps out learning trajectories specific to each apprentice focused on mastering shift responsibilities, the craft of coffee, and personal growth. Learning and support are adjusted and sometimes readjusted based on needs and challenges apprentices may be facing in and out of work. Individual check-ins and debriefs are the norm. Group professional development sessions, shadow opportunities, and leadership mind-set acquisition supplement all the other intentional work leading to deep learning and growth at an accelerated pace.

Expectations are high. Support is always present. Sweep and mop your best. Use the power within you to connect with others, customers, and teammates alike. Engage in your craft. Terms we throw around to solidify our culture include “taking learning into your own hands,” “every shift counts,” and “have an ‘I got you’ mentality.” With all these things happening, apprentices become strong, confident young professionals ready to share their considerable gifts that have been there all along.

Challenges and Wisdom

One of our biggest challenges in this work is to build the right model with the right team of professionals and full organizational buy-in. Resources and integration are required for both the business and social impact sides to achieve excellence. It takes developing a team with a specific set of professionals who are cross-trained to work within a model that naturally lends itself toward tension: between business and mission or education.

Excellence in business and excellence in education (or mission) are integral and equally important. Success of an apprenticeship program relies on high-quality execution on the educational side and equally high expectations on the business side. The two are interdependent. Too many times, we sacrifice one for the other. We start an apprenticeship program with people who know the subject area (the craftsmen), but they aren't skilled in teaching, training, relationship building, or cultural competency. Or vice versa: the big-hearted, passionate people-person starts a program but doesn't

know the subject area in depth, and apprentices don't have access to the true craft and depth of knowledge needed for mastery.

In Prodigy's case, we started with a founder and founding team with missional expertise. Our first hire, even before the executive director was on payroll, was a coffee craftsman (a start-up consultant who became our first-year operations manager). This was the best use of our limited funding we could have made at the time. Even today, even though missional impact is our primary purpose, our operations manager represents and advocates for the business case and best practices for business decisionmaking. And it is his role to teach apprentices his thought processes, not only in craft coffee but in operations and business development.

The additional challenge in this work is to sustain equal business, educational, and cultural excellence throughout organizational growth and with personnel changes.

What's Next

Prodigy has a vision for the workforce. It is a new generation of healthy, innovative workers who are transformational leaders—young people cocreating an economically thriving and equitable country. To do this, we are creating an apprenticeship model that can inspire and support apprenticeship in all workplaces.

For our part, Prodigy is taking a slow-scale approach to deepening and broadening impact over the next five years. We are developing a road map in three key areas:

1. **Deepen leadership development.** The first is expanding our apprenticeship training to include new pathways for apprentice graduates within and beyond Prodigy. Our first internal pathway is that of manager development. This is a salaried two-to-three-year leadership, operations, and craft coffeehouse training program. The goal is for apprentices to one day open, operate, and own a highly successful coffeehouse. This takes community wealth building full circle and creates a development pathway for apprentices into leadership roles at Prodigy Ventures. Additional leadership or apprenticeship pathways include a pathway for a case manager or navigator, a community engagement coordinator, a roaster, or an equipment technician.
2. **Expand operations.** In the coming year, we plan to open a second craft coffeehouse, learning lab, and roastery. Once we secure a second location, we plan to build a state-of-the-art learning lab, work toward earning "trainer status" from the Specialty Coffee Association, and increase numbers in our apprentice manager training program. An additional coffee shop and roastery will increase leadership and entrepreneurship experience for apprentices, increase the number of apprenticeship opportunities, diversify technical skill offerings, and increase organizational efficiency and vertical integration. We have explored five opportunities to expand and passed

on each for various reasons. We were recently contacted by the Adams County Board of Commissioners, who requested to use our apprenticeship model, and we are exploring this opportunity. We hope to open up to 5 coffeehouses over the next 5 to 10 years.

3. **Broaden reach.** The third area of scale will be to create a consulting enterprise. More than 50 organizations have sought our advice on how to replicate this model, and we have presented at multiple national venues. Because of limited capacity, we cannot adequately support organizations. Consulting will allow Prodigy to share our core competencies of youth engagement, apprenticeship, and creating cultures of healing with other social enterprises and businesses. We plan to create a business model for this in 2019.

Stephanie Frances, founder and executive director of Prodigy Ventures, brings 12 years of experience in youth career development. Her expertise lies in activating youth talent and creating dynamic cultures that engage youth in their intrinsic motivation to learn. She has led Prodigy's enterprise to double-digit year-over-year sales growth and such accolades as the best new coffeehouse in Denver, and its apprenticeship model for disconnected youth has an 85 percent completion rate. Frances recently represented Prodigy at the Global Homeboy Network Gathering, the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Forum, and the National Youth Employment Coalition. Frances holds a master's degree in nonprofit management from Regis University and was a Denver Business Journal 2018 Outstanding Women in Business finalist.