

*“Fit In or Stand Out* is an inspirational guide to understand, express and use your true colors in every situation. A very insightful, recognizable and sharp exposure of the daily tension between conformity and staying true to your unique Talent. A gift for everyone who wants to unlock their individual power, creativity, and impact every day a bit more.

MARGA MATHIJSSEN, VP Marketing at Unilever

“Anke has done a masterful job at taking challenging concepts and making them actionable. I've shrunk to fit in and it feels like wearing someone else's clothes...that are too tight and not at all my style. But I didn't have words to describe that until reading this book. However, my limiting tendencies are no match for the joy and freedom I've found in letting my Talent shine. I'm a Guide. Claiming that sacred identity makes me feel stronger and bolder. And we need bold women now more than ever. So get this book and I'll see you in the arena.”

LORI HARRIS, Sr Director Global Fortune 100

“An important, well-researched book on the power of Talent and uncovering hidden potential. Eloquenty, Anke Tusveld, invites us to revitalize our organization using our authentic Talent—very valuable in a fast-paced, agile world in which everyone seems to be paralyzed by their tendency to stick to “what we were used to.”

MENNO LANTING, Author *Connect* and *The Disruptive Paradox*



“This book really had me thinking about my Unique Talent. An in-depth read in this fast paced world, Anke Tusveld provides hundreds of questions and highly relevant examples. This book is for anyone who wants to amplify their authentic leadership style, without the usual gimmicky quick fix.”

AN CLAES, Fortune 100 Global Executive

“It’s remarkable, how Anke Tusveld, step by step, leads the reader towards standing out and using their Talent. Using incredible accurate words, she shines the light on the magnificent impact you make when taking your Talent as your starting point. It’s a generous book full of wisdom, elaborate examples and vivid metaphors. Definitely a must-read!”

BERNADET HAVEMAN, Entrepreneur (Droom van Zwolle)  
and Talent Coach

“Anke brings to this book a wealth of wisdom wrapped in useful, applicable concepts that create space to discover one’s innate strengths and most importantly, ways to bring them to life.”

NICOLE FLINTERMAN, Mindfulness educator and coach  
at Unfolding Mindfulness

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# FIT IN OR STAND OUT



USE YOUR TALENT  
WHEN IT MATTERS

ANKE TUSVELD

InterAgri Publishers  
United States



“What if the so-called inviolable bounds  
drawn by convention  
turn out to be nothing else but  
innocuous chalk lines.”

– Louise von Salome





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“Consider yourself  
lucky if  
you have heard  
a whispering voice  
in your mind  
asking:  
*Is this really what I  
want? Is this all  
I've got?  
Who am I really?”*

# ONE — INVITATION TO LEARN

When we slowly but surely are groomed into something we are not.

Cara's honesty struck me. She had lost control of her life's steering wheel. Her primary focus on other people's needs had replaced any sense of really knowing who she was herself. In one of our sessions she realized:

*I feel I have moved away from that spontaneous, passionate alive person that I was. I spend so little time on identifying what I want in life—from career to hobbies to even how I wish to spend my time on the weekend.*

*I feel like I am waiting for life to happen to me rather than actually steering myself deliberately in the direction I want to go. This seems so ironic when I am interested in so many things of such a broad nature, but I am just not doing them.*

Life was happening to her as she ran like a madwoman to keep up, but she was starting to realize she wanted to get off of that hamster wheel. But how? What was the alternative? What was her purpose, and what made her happy? These were questions that, deep

down, she might have known the answers to, but having lost complete touch with her own truth, she could no longer answer them.

If you'd met Cara at work, you wouldn't have known things were bothering her so much. She was an ambitious business consultant with a career on the rise, seeming to tick all the boxes. She rocked at fitting in perfectly, but in order to do so, she felt she had to hide her true colors from the outside world. Sadly, her fear of being herself largely impacted what she had to offer to make a difference in her world.

Cara<sup>1</sup> is not the only person to unintentionally choose to *change herself over being herself*. Over 80 percent of the hundreds of professionals in leadership development training programs I facilitate deal with the delicate dance of fitting in and standing out. Both are important to career success. However, most of the time, the balance between the two is lost. These professionals are secretly insecure, but they comprehensively cover their anxiety by wearing a mask, especially in cases when they're meeting with people they look up to or when the stakes are especially high, for example during annual budget meetings or performance reviews.

In wearing that mask, they lose their ability to be autonomous and creative at work. Despite the fact that they have relatively successful careers, they feel exhausted by pretending to be someone they are not and are fed up with constantly comparing themselves to others. They desire to become themselves again: authentic, confident, and independent leaders who make a significant difference and who are able to connect on a deeper level in a fast-paced, demanding corporate culture. They desire to leave a legacy.

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure my clients' privacy, all names and details are changed throughout the book.

To be ourselves in a world that is trying to make us like everyone else is one of our biggest challenges in life and work. Slowly but surely, we are groomed into something we are not, starting with school, the first step for many people en route to a successful career. It's as if we each order the same "how to be perfect" box online, and then we hide in that box for years. Over time, we build a gilded-guard because we think others won't think we are enough without it. We accelerate in the ability to fit in because of our inborn desire to belong.

I, myself, am no different. I fully understand this course of events, because I lived in the same fitting-in fog. I even remember the exact moment I decided I wanted to fit in. It was an afternoon, and I was surrounded by other high-schoolers who were all winding their way down the narrow path next to the school building. I stood still in the middle of this noisy stream of people and was struck by my thoughts. My hands clamped to hold my backpack in my attempt to control my mind. *I want to fit in. I am fed up with looking up to the popular kids. I want to belong.* That moment marked two decades of fitting in. I became great at knowing how to dress appropriately, knowing what to say, knowing when to laugh and knowing who to best connect with.

It worked. My ability to blend in got me far. At university, I was selected for the popular extracurricular jobs, like running a discotheque for a year. Selected from thousands of applicants, I got to do an internship for a telecommunications company in Tokyo. In my career, I got along very well with clients and I was able to connect easily with people of different cultures, which was helpful for living and working abroad happily. In a sense, I am grateful that I took my desire to fit in seriously. But standing on that pathway next to my high school, I made one assumption that was fundamentally wrong.

What is the assumption that turns out to be fundamentally wrong?

I thought fitting in and wanting to belong meant that I had to turn into someone other than who I originally was. As if my “original me” wasn’t good enough. In my attempt to be accepted by the outside world, I started to ignore my inside world. Since the moment I decided that I wanted to conform to “what’s cool and what’s not,” I began living in a fog. At least, it felt like a thick fog surrounded me, because it felt like my senses were numbed. Sure, I was experiencing my life, but was *I* really in it?

My ability to fit in by changing myself took its toll. I decided to study at a technical university to prove that I was as intelligent as my brother and to meet the nonexistent demands of my parents. It might have made more sense for me to have studied psychology, a field that had fascinated me since an early age. As a result, despite having an exciting time during my university years, it seemed like I was living someone else’s life. For a long time, I was able to numb my own feelings to satisfy other people’s feelings and needs. My survival strategy was to reside in my head, which was, in hindsight, a pretty strong accomplishment since I originally am a person who thrives using her senses. Ultimately, I lost touch with what I truly felt or wanted. It was if, with the decision to fit in, I handed over my own sense of direction. My true colors tarnished and by blending in, I turned into someone bland.

Suppressed stressful feelings eventually caused hyperventilation, which became my wake-up call to finally escape the numbing fog. I cautiously started to add some of my own feelings to the mix, but I wasn’t sure how to proceed and get off the hamster wheel with both feet. Those initial feelings weren’t all kittens and rainbows. They hurt. I decided to choose a study of my own choice, a three-year Tal-

ent Development Academy at the Pulsar Institute<sup>2</sup>. They placed a mirror in front of me and asked: Who are you? What are your desires? What is your unique value to share with others? I didn't have any substantial answers because I was disconnected from myself.

From that moment on, things shifted, and I started to make my own choices. I found my way off of the hamster wheel. Step by step, my true colors emerged, and it felt extremely good despite the vulnerability that came with it. I escaped the numbing cloud and reconnected with passion, love, and life. I am still enjoying every step of it today. Learning how my mind worked, knowing what triggered my tendencies to fit in, and how to master those tendencies was lifesaving.

Identifying my own unique value helped me to quit looking up to others. What a relief! It opened my eyes to the amazing fact that we each have a specific and unique Talent, which is the root of our individual skills. When we identify and enable ourselves to express this Talent, we are able to make a significant change in our world.

The book you are about to read is my invitation to you to start standing out in your own way. I invite you to discover your signature strength and to bring that wonderful value into reality. Not only because the expression of this signature strength is the perfect antidote for your out-of-control fitting-in tendencies, but because your Talent, with a capital T, enables you to make a significant change in your world, small and big.

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<sup>2</sup> The Pulsar Institute is based in the Netherlands. You can find more information in Dutch: [www.pulsarinspireert.nl](http://www.pulsarinspireert.nl)

Imagine yourself later in life sitting in your retirement home sharing personal stories and memories. Many people do not realize they have been living someone else's life until they are sipping cocktails with their fellow seniors and feel that nagging regret. Wouldn't it be great if those retirement home stories were all heart-fulfilling and significant events instead of regrets? Consider yourself lucky if you have heard a whispering voice in your mind asking: *Is this really what I want? Is this all I've got? Who am I really? What do I really stand for?*

## Finding a balance between fitting in and standing out

We lose our ability to stand out in favor of our desire to fit in

The incredibly open look in my son's eyes touches me over and over again. He seems to receive everything with wonder and curiosity. Each time he finds a rock, he is amazed by its colors, stripes, weight, or shape. He totally loses track of time or his surroundings. Before his admiration for rocks existed, I never noticed how much beauty lies at our feet. One thing I envy more than ever is his wide-eyed wonder. I hope he keeps that curious outlook for as long as possible. But in theory, I know that eventually he'll partially lose this ability to look at the world without filters.

At some point, he will get chastised for expressing his enthusiasm, and he'll begin to hold back. It could be from being ignored, or from not having his excitement met, or from a non-intentional harsh remark. But somehow, he will get hurt in expressing his sincere enthusiasm, and he will be tempted to adjust his natural way of being,



just like it happened to most of us. I truly hope he is able to maintain his unique spark and that open look in his eyes.

In *Creative Confidence*<sup>3</sup>, writers David Kelley and Tom Kelley point to a moment in childhood development where we, as kids, start to judge ourselves and feel judged by others. We start to pay attention to the reactions around us and we stop dancing like nobody’s watching. This is when our creativity is most vulnerable. We start reacting to the outside world, using cues to learn how to fit in and to escape being judged. In meeting life’s demands, we trade in qualities that make us unique for ones that allow us to fit in and belong. We react instead of creating. At some point, we realize that we’re not leading our own dance but are being led by the outside world.

### How is your balance?

Take a moment to think about this: What colleague do you admire? Who is an example for you at work? I’m sure it’s most likely someone who is authentic and who isn’t afraid to show their true colors at key moments, rather than someone who excels at fitting in.

I’m curious. What is your balance? Take a look at the picture and

	<b>FITTING IN</b>	<b>STANDING OUT</b>
<i>I say...</i>	I should I have to	Let's I want to
<i>I want to...</i>	Be acknowledged Please others Meet expectations Belong	Make a difference Create significance Be proud of added value Connect
<i>I am...</i>	Pretending Secretly insecure Wearing a mask to cover my true feelings Matching myself with others Ignoring my own feelings	Authentic Confident Vulnerable Autonomous True to my own feelings

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Kelley and David Kelley, *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All* (Crown Business, 2013)

answer honestly. Do you excel at fitting in? Do you live the expected life? Are you ignoring or postponing your dreams? Or maybe, you've lost sight on what your dreams and desires might be?

What do you hear yourself saying more often? I should, and ... I have to... or, let's, and ... I want to...? Are you driven to be acknowledged, to please others, and to meet expectations? How many times during your week do you feel so focused and in such a flow that you know you are really making a difference? And are you even aware of the value (your value) that you are adding or could be adding to your organization?

You might just be so skilled at hiding your true self that you don't have a clue what "your true self" even means. You might have lost track of what you really want and who you really are. And while you're working hard, you might have the feeling that there is some unused potential trapped inside you. Has the "I'm fine" mask that most of us wear become so comfortable that it's your default mode? What will be left if you unveil yourself? Who is behind the mask? What true potential hides behind the guard? Aren't you curious?

This book's content: What does it mean to stand out?

Author Michael Hall's children's book, *Red: A Crayon's Story*<sup>4</sup> hits the nail on its head. He introduces Red, a crayon with a bright red label. This crayon is unhappy, since he tries his best to color as beautifully as his buddies, but none of his attempts lead to something extraordinary. First, everyone tries to help him by encouraging him to draw delicious red strawberries or fresh oranges by mixing colors with his yellow classmate. Red is heartbroken since his drawings turn

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Hall, *Red: A Crayon's Story* (Greenwillow Books, 2015)

out to be ugly-colored and he suffers from all the remarks others are making behind his back. Then a new friend looks beyond Red's label and asks him to draw a blue ocean. First, Red sadly replies, "I can't. I am Red." After some encouragement, Red gives it another try, although hesitantly. What happens? Red discovers he is actually blue beneath his red label. Now, he can draw everything blue from jeans to bells, from whales to berries, drawing beautifully without any effort, enjoying every drawing.

Standing out means finding the color we are wearing beneath our label and daring to start drawing like our life depends on it, enjoying every step on our way. It all starts with realizing and acknowledging that in our attempts to belong, we have changed ourselves and have been coloring with the wrong color, all the while growing another label from the outside.

*Part I: Fitting In* of this book answers every aspect of our tendencies to fit in.

- What makes us put on masks, conform, and adjust? What are the biological, cultural, and psychological reasons that make us want to fit in over and over, even beyond our own control?
- What are the benefits and what do we sacrifice while fitting in?
- How can we let go of our tendencies of fit in? Practice with three specific ways to shed self-doubts and self-judgments.

What color are we really from the inside? What if we could be as engaged in something as we were as children? What if we could kindle the spark within and not let it cease shining? What if we could make strong, autonomous decisions without hesitation? What if we would skip meeting imagined demands and save that energy for adding creative value in our own way? More and more, employers and customers have started looking for authentic and fresh approach-

es. They actually want us to bring our unique value to the table because “a copy is never as good as the original.”

*Part II: Standing Out* explains what it actually means to stand out using our own authentic flavor.

- How can we stand out in significance? What is the role of our authentic Talent, the root of all our skills?
- What habits do we have to unlearn in order to stand out and make a difference?
- How can we uncover this hidden Talent? And how do we express our Talent?

Finally, after having colored with other colors for so long, what does it really mean to start being ourselves in an environment that doesn't seem to invite us to do so? Standing out in our own comfortable setting takes courage, but standing out in a not-so-comfortable setting like work is a whole different ballgame. However, the office is the ultimate practice area to master the art of standing out. Our automatic tendencies to adjust what we think other people expect are easily triggered in stressful environments. If, for example, we're operating in a corporate alpha-dominated culture and are joining “their” game: How can we learn the rules while not losing ourselves in the process? How can we take part and add our own flavor and shine at the same time?

*The last three chapters* of Part II dive deep into three areas of practice, the courage to lead from within, to create, and to connect. Each chapter will provide two specific Authenticity Enablers that will help us along the way of expressing our Talent without holding back.

- The Courage to Lead from within: What enables us to stay in the lead in a world full of distractions, fears, and seductions that keep us turning outwards focusing at our outside labels?

- The Courage to Create: What enables us to make a *difference* by doing things *differently*?
- The Courage to Connect: What enables us to really act on our Talent and stand out in a place that used to be threatening?

Until this point, your life may have looked like series of tryouts such that you're ready for the premiere. So, if you are curious to discover what magic you can bring to every situation, accept this invitation to learn. Learn how to get off that hamster wheel and out of that one-size-fits-all box. Learn what it takes to feel alive again and revitalize your surroundings with your Talent.

And remember, the learning process isn't always free from hardship—we all have to endure our fears when stepping outside of our comfort zone. Be encouraged by German diplomat, psychotherapist, and Zen master Karlfried Durckheim, who encapsulates this process by saying, “Everything that is alive is destined to evolve. But we will never become ourselves automatically. We will only become what we are if we take ourselves as serious as our most precious work.”

## The world is changing: Four (more) reasons to stand out

The most personal reason to identify your unique value is to live your life and not someone else's idea of it. However, on a larger scale, there are even more reasons to stand out and become more *you*. I want to introduce you to four developments that draw the bigger picture and explain why standing out is even more important now and in the future.

### Reason 1: A Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world asks for a steady, authentic individual foundation

In the industrial era, employers were looking for standard approaches and saw employees as resources that had to fit into predestined boxes in order to perform standard tasks. But the industrial era is over—accomplishments and effects already achieved have been written in history books that are now collecting dust on dark bookshelves. We are living in a connected world, in a VUCA world.

VUCA is an acronym developed by the U.S. military after the collapse of the Soviet Union to describe a multipolar world: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. We need to thrive within an unpredictable environment, making sense of complicated interdependencies in now globally-connected societies. In most working environments, we have to make decisions without having the whole picture, handling risks and uncertainties to one extent or another. Ambiguities challenge us to take a stand without a single truth backing us. We can no longer count on the seeming certainty and predictability of binary choices—capitalism versus communism, democracy versus autocracy. Choices and consequences are now far less clear than

they once were. Turbulence, unpredictability, and complexity surround us.

To thrive in this VUCA world, we are in need of an anchor. We need an eye of the storm. Will your boss or CEO take on this role? Perhaps, although he or she will probably be busy developing his or her own personal stability to stand out in these ongoing storms of change. The times when we could solely rely on other people to make decisions for us in our jobs are over. Organizations have turned into large, complex networks, and it's almost impossible to be led by one single board. Our foundation needs to be stronger than ever to make decisions without being aware of the whole context. We need to change our focus from merely outwards (What do other people do?) to inwards (What do I stand for? What is my purpose? What do I think is important?).

Reason 2: Global challenges ask for creative minds, however...

We are in desperate need of innovative minds to create solutions to deal with scarce energy resources, migration due to conflicts and climate change, and a still-existing inequality among people. To innovate, we need creative and unique human beings with diverse opinions and ways of thinking. The time when the world required standardized people to perform standardized tasks is over. A large part of those jobs have been and will be computerized. However, are we and our organizations ready to do what it takes to really innovate and set foot on nonconforming pathways?

When I owned an innovation agency, *The Creativity Company*, with one of my best friends, we facilitated a large variety of creativity processes, from the creation of sustainable greenhouses to market intro-

ductions for Unilever, from new product development for large steel companies to new beer products. We also taught managers how to think creatively and how to facilitate creative thinking within their organizations. At the time, we mainly focused on teaching them creative thinking techniques and how to design creative thinking processes. Thousands of ideas were created, as well as lots of energy and buy-ins from colleagues, always important in innovation development. However, there was one thing that fascinated me and which eventually drove me into the area of personal development.

Despite the fact that we laid out dozens of creative thinking techniques, people didn't allow themselves to tap into their creativity fully. Their minds, or at least the minds of those who thought they weren't creative, remained rather inflexible. Their brains kept sticking to their default settings.

I now realize their minds were glued to their tendencies to fit in and therefore got stuck before they had even allowed themselves to imagine all the different possibilities. Those different possibilities scared them off.

IDEO founder David Kelley and his brother and IDEO partner, Tom Kelley, write in *Creative Confidence*<sup>1</sup> about how they encountered the same thing. They met professionals who would grab their smartphones when the process got fuzzy and unconventional, saying, "I'm just not the creative type." But when the clients stuck with it, they surprised themselves. When they developed a kind of ease with the uneasiness, they realized that they were more capable than they initially thought.

This is exactly what has always driven me in everything I do in work. People are so much more capable than they think. There is so much more in store than we think, if only we allow ourselves to develop ease with our uneasiness. Our creativity is essential to success



in any discipline or industry. According to chief executives around the world, creativity is the most sought-after trait in leaders today.

Most companies are designed for efficiency and risk elimination. According to intensive research by Harvard Business School Professor Francesca Gino<sup>5</sup> involving more than 1,000 employees in a variety of industries, less than 10 percent said they worked in companies that regularly encourage nonconformity. In her article she states:

*The pendulum has swung too far in the direction of conformity. For decades the principles of scientific management have prevailed. Leaders have been overly focused on designing efficient processes and getting employees to follow them. Now they need to think about when conformity hurts their business.*

To be successful and evolve, organizations need to strike a balance between a necessary structure and the freedom that helps employees do their best work.

Last weekend I was on the beach together with my dog. She desperately wanted to play and soon, she found a friend. But this dog was trained so well to obey the rules that he would stay seated, despite all the strategies my dog seduced him with. Have we also over-trained our professionals to conform to the existing rules? Are the lists of competencies they have to succeed in still allowing them to play, use their imaginations, and experiment? Why do companies invest a lot of time and money to create assessments for the “perfect leader” whose predefined scores on predefined capabilities might result in ho-hum outcomes? And if modern organizations value inno-

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<sup>5</sup> Francesca Gino, “Let Your Workers Rebel,” *Harvard Business Review* (2016)