HAROLD HILLMAN PhD

FITTING IN
Standing Out

Finding Your Authentic Voice at Work

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Dedication

If you add up all the hours that you spend at work each week — both the physical and mental hours — it's fair to say that you're investing a significant amount of yourself into a cause or purpose that should be more important than a pay cheque. Sadly, many people go to work each day with no real sense that their perspective matters as to how the company operates or how it will grow.

Silence is not golden in people or companies where authenticity is truly valued. Whether you're a team leader or a member of a team, it is essential that you stay connected to your authentic voice if you want to make a positive difference — where both you and the team are growing.

I dedicate this book to anyone who may be wondering whether *fitting in* has become too comfortable, or *standing out* has become too painful. And if you believe that you've got it just right, I especially hope you find value in learning how to sustain the power of your authentic voice. It defines who you are.

Harold Hillman
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harold Hillman is the managing director of Sigmoid Curve Consulting Group. Based in Auckland since 2003 and a New Zealand citizen since 2008, Hillman coaches business leaders and executive teams to be more purposeful about leadership and what it means to inspire others towards greater possibilities.

Prior to launching Sigmoid, Hillman served in senior executive roles with Fonterra, Prudential Financial and Amoco Corporation. A clinical psychologist in his early career, he developed a passion for leadership development while teaching at the United States Air Force Academy. Hillman was a member of the task force commissioned by the Clinton administration in 1993 to end discrimination against gay citizens wanting to serve openly in the US military.

Hillman earned a master's degree in education from Harvard University and a PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Pittsburgh. His first book, *The Impostor Syndrome*, was published in 2013.

A big fan of learning curves, Hillman has set himself a major goal to continue exploring over the next decade the frontier of authenticity, pushing forward into uncharted territory.

Sigmoid
RIDING THE CURVE

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Foreword

I have had the pleasure of knowing Harold Hillman since 2009. He has worked with me personally, and then with my executive teams in Australia and New Zealand. Since then he has worked with a number of people in my broader team. He is a prominent element of the culture we have here at National Australia Bank Ltd, and I value him as a mentor and role model.

Harold is himself a genuine, authentic leader. He holds personal qualities of precision, sharpness and wisdom, and applies these to his work. A point of admiration for me was when Harold, in his fifties, made the decision to stretch himself; to not only start up a business and run marathons, but also to write two books. The two books — *The Impostor Syndrome* and now *Fitting In, Standing Out* — provide simple, practical models that are easy for busy executives to apply.

Leaders today face constant challenge, change and tension in their professional lives. Increasingly complex situations require them to seek advice from others, and then make decisions, often under pressure. To be an effective leader in this environment, you need to continually learn about yourself and about those you lead or deal with. While it is not easy to take the time to learn and grow when you are bombarded by a dozen demands on your time, it is crucial to take the time to learn to be better. *Fitting In, Standing Out* helps expand your perspectives and explores profound, true concepts simply and in bite-sized chapters. Toolkits, checklists, case studies and activities make these complex ideas easy to apply in your day-to-day life.

Harold cites Peter Drucker's famous 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast', and over the years I have learned first-hand that culture is vital for an organisation's success. However, 'corporate culture' as a concept has also become nebulous and even hackneyed. *Fitting In, Standing Out* shows you what underpins it, why it is important, and how to get there. The biggest driver

of culture is the leader, and the biggest behaviour is being real. Key to this is *authenticity*. For a leader, this is how you turn up and how others experience you: if you are reliable and consistent, you can earn trust. In Chapter Four Harold explores the seven key qualities of authenticity: positivity; being real; edge; vulnerability; energy; integrity; and connectivity. Of these, being real resonates the most with me. It's about being present, listening, and caring about people even if you have to do hard things.

In an environment full of seemingly endless challenges, we are told that leaders know what they are doing and have everything under control. In fact, Harold shows us that real, true leaders acknowledge the frames they are looking through, and learn to trust and extend trust. It is through trust that performance thrives.

Harold Hillman has made me the leader I am and continues to shape the leader I am becoming. I value that very much. So it is with pleasure that I have read *Fitting In, Standing Out*, knowing that the wisdom contained in its pages will enable others to become the best leaders they can be and to create authentic cultures among those they lead.

Andrew Thorburn
Group CEO of National Australia Bank

1.

It Starts Early

After hugging her mum goodbye for the third time since getting out of the car, five-year-old Renée propels herself through the school gate and walks towards her teacher, who has a group of kids assembled around her. The school yard is full of groups of kids standing around several teachers, all of whom resemble mother ducks gathering their broods into formation.

Be good for the teacher, Renée. That was the edict her mother had repeated a few times over the weekend and again in the car that morning. Renée recognises two kids from kindergarten, both huddled on the other side of the teacher. She falls into line next to two new girls who have started to skip about. Renée likes the skipping game and soon joins in. Before long, the three of them fall out of formation from the others, skipping together and giggling with glee.

'Settle down, girls. I need you to stay close to me,' the teacher chides. Renée quickly pulls back, but the other two girls keep jumping, one of them with even more vigour than before. *Be good for the teacher, Renée.* Clearly the other girls aren't bound by that same edict. And they are still having fun. Renée starts to

skip again, but pulls back when the teacher looks sternly at her. *I won't do that again*, she decides. *I'm a good girl.*

It starts early, this dilemma to be 'good' and fit in with the group, while also yearning to buck the trend and be your own person. Like Renée, and all of the kids in the school yard who are trying to find their place, you have been recalibrating across your lifetime to manage this recurring dilemma. Some people lose themselves by fitting in. And some people lose others by standing out. You've had more years than Renée has to find that healthy balance. If you are still recalibrating your authentic voice, chances are you have not yet discovered your personal sweet spot. The chapters that follow recommend some strategies and pathways to navigate there.

2.

Your Sweet Spot

Reconciling the tension between fitting in and standing out is one of life's beautiful dilemmas, and one that you are bound to face many times over. If you opt for either extreme on this continuum, your voice is likely to be deemed irrelevant, as it's hard to influence others when you are either mute or overbearing. One of the major objectives of this book is to help leaders at all levels, and their colleagues, to find their own personal 'sweet spot' between the two extremes, recognising that the optimal spot will vary for each person. That's what makes it authentic.

Fitting in is not a bad thing at all. In fact, there are many upsides associated with a person doing so as quickly as possible. The benefits include the positive conclusions we draw about such a person's ability to adapt quickly to new surroundings — often called intelligence — as well as the group's appreciation when a new member shows respect for the traditions and customs that define their particular social order. For example, Western female journalists who cover stories in Middle Eastern cultures often wear a head scarf as a show of respect for local tradition and custom, even if it is not their own personal preference or belief.

Social order requires members to adhere to certain ways of

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doing things and particular ways of being. This is the case in society, in families, in groups, in companies and on teams. And, given that being accepted by the larger group is what most people actively seek, it resonates when sociologists tell us that the need to fit in is a far greater force than the desire to stand out. While companies often boast about how much they value authenticity, there are many factors that make it far more difficult for a person to deviate from what the team has (often implicitly) deemed to be acceptable behaviour. Regardless of size, structure or purpose, all teams are governed by social order.

As for standing out, it is sometimes viewed as courageous, especially when it is a purposeful rebuke of something that we all know has been working against the team's success and *finally* someone has had the mana to put the issue on the table. However, that tends to be the exception. It is far more common for us to look negatively upon someone who pushes against the accepted norms that define 'how we do things here', especially if we have personally helped to create these norms. More times than not, we will deem these people as unable to adapt, self-oriented and — at the extreme — social misfits. When the new person doesn't fit in, we often attribute it to a personal flaw of theirs, rather than anything negative about ourselves. That's why

standing out can often be a very lonely place on the continuum, particularly if the majority of the team is huddled at the other end wondering why you are finding it so difficult to fit in.

On most teams and in most companies there is a greater gravitational pull towards fitting in, especially when social order is really emphasised. Any ground soldier going through basic military training can attest to this. The rationale in that situation is to break down the desire to stand out from the team. In this context, getting quickly in line with the prescribed social order is not only appreciated, but also expected. To stand out often feels like pushing against a strong headwind; it's going against the natural grain or current, so it requires more effort along with a fair dose of courage.

For many reasons, fitting in is less cumbersome and feels more natural. Moreover, formal inductions to the company tend to reinforce the norms of fitting in — the new person is introduced to the nuts and bolts of the company's social order. Even in the absence of a formal induction, new people begin to learn very quickly which roads not to wander down. Social order is common in every company and on every team, and, in general, is necessary for all of the benefits associated with maintaining uniformity and order. In fact, that's what brand identity is all about: a consistency of both the experience and its impact. It's hard for a company or team to develop a brand — a way of being — in the absence of social order. Very often, it is important that the team is marching in tight unison.

The challenge with tight unison is that it makes it tougher for someone to step out of line, even ever so slightly, without being perceived as disruptive. Disruption is often noisy, and there's a natural inclination to turn noise down, if not off. People who have a different view or want to test a different approach often face the same reaction when their desire to stand out begins to disturb the peace. And the really curious thing about fitting in is that, after a while, we become skilled at silencing ourselves before others even get a chance to reach for our volume button.

As you read this book, keep thinking about the impact you would like to have at work, in your personal life, and even at a broader level. This book is about navigating towards an optimal

"People are more likely to follow you if they can connect with your conviction, if they sense that something truly matters to you."

sweet spot on that continuum between fitting in and standing out — a spot that enables you to have the most influence and to make a real difference. Some of you may decide to turn the volume up on your voice so that others have no doubt that your perspective matters. For others, perhaps there is more noise than you anticipated or prefer around your noble efforts to challenge the status quo. In the interests of reconnecting with the team, you may need to turn your volume down or even switch to a different frequency. Or you may decide to leave, particularly if you have made a gallant effort to succeed, but it still feels like you are pushing water uphill.

It's all very personal really, which is why I wrote this book: to help anyone who believes that it's time to do some deep thinking about how they might have a greater impact in life. Deep change rarely occurs without first looking inward. No matter how you slice it, leadership is about your ability to influence others. People are more likely to follow you if they can connect with your conviction, if they sense that something truly matters to you. That's why it is important that you land on your own personal sweet spot. Some call that point their True North. Whatever you choose to call it, it's the place where you are most likely to find your authentic voice.

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The Focus of This Book

While most of the examples and references in this book are about work, the insights you gain will have a broader reach into everyday life. Whether at home or at work, or at the intersection between the two, there are those moments in time — perhaps even now — when you are faced with the choice to either 'get with the programme' or risk the consequences. The characters and themes in this book will resonate if you are pondering whether you have been too quiet, or too loud, or perhaps are still navigating towards your personal sweet spot on the continuum between fitting in and standing out.

You will especially find this book of interest if you:

- are currently going through induction to a new team or organisation
- are facing a personal dilemma about how to challenge the status quo
- are on the fringe of the team, struggling to get traction and have impact
- have become isolated, and perhaps disengaged, in your quest to be more authentic
- are a team leader and want to ensure that each team member speaks with an authentic voice
- lead a company and want to ensure that the culture is conducive to authentic leadership at all levels.

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Demystifying Authenticity

Authenticity is a great example of a *construct*, which is a complex idea or theory formed from a number of simpler elements. Some people call it *synthesis*. It's like when one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms combine to produce a molecule of water, every single drop of which is a vital construct to our very existence. Authenticity is similar to water, not just in terms of being made up of various elements, but also because people tend to soak it up, feel enriched by it and energised in its aftermath — perhaps like blades of grass do after a soaking rain on a hot day.

Authenticity is a vital construct to us as humans. We are compelled towards it in the same way that a tree will twist itself into the optimal position to absorb as much sunlight as it can. That's how vital authenticity feels. And that's the experience of being with an authentic person, whether she is four years old and telling you like it is, or he is 97 and you're hanging on his every word. When you feel an authentic connection with another person, you are drawn to the wonderful complexity of that vital construct. It has an energising effect on people. Perhaps that's why anything authentic — be it person or artefact — is deemed to be of value and is regarded as precious. Often it has the power to rejuvenate, much in the same way hope does. There are some

people in your life, or who cross your path, who leave you feeling enriched after you have been around them for a while, even in the face of adversity.

So, before you strike off in search of your authentic voice, it will be important to understand more about the elements that, when synthesised, form such a powerful and compelling force.

When people talk about authenticity, what exactly are they drawn to?

POSITIVITY

This word captures the essence of optimism, hope, inspiration, affirmation — all aspects of the positive personal reflections people have after an encounter with an authentic person. This positivity is not about someone being nice or pleasant, even though the compelling nature of authenticity is associated with you trusting that this person means you well. There are many upsides to being civil and pleasant to others, but the essence of positivity goes beyond that. It also speaks to the impact of that encounter, such as a person who inspires a team in heated conflict to stay focused on what they all want as an end result of that passion, rather than letting the heat of the conflict consume their positive intent.

Positivity is especially helpful to people who need hope or inspiration, and even aspiration. The examples of Rudy Giuliani in the days following the 2001 attacks in lower Manhattan, and of Bob Parker in the aftermath of the devastating Christchurch earthquakes, capture the essence of what hope and optimism can bring to people who are looking for some way to pull through adversity. Even while working through their own respective bouts of vulnerability, both mayors conveyed the optimism that best captures what positivity is all about. When you are inspired by another person, it's usually because you suddenly feel more positive about facing the pressures and challenges in your own life.