



When Work Becomes a Holding Cell: Finding Authentic Work

By John Deacon

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The Holding Cell You Cannot See

You can rack up responsibility, hit quota, and still feel like you are doing time. The badge says trusted, the calendar says busy, but the work does not feel like yours. This represents someone else's playbook, someone else's metrics, someone else's skin in the game. You clock hours to prove you care while a quiet part of you learns not to.

Scar: knowing less but believing you had achieved more, because the scoreboard said so. Pattern: the more you performed, the less at home you felt. The gap extends beyond the work itself; the gap concerns ownership. When work is handed down rather than authored, originality drains out. That constitutes the authenticity void: you are useful, but not yourself.

Corporate life can become a kind of holding cell: not because corporations are evil, but because the role you occupy can compress your agency until you live out of sync with your own rhythm. Time elongates. Motivation becomes compliance. The internal meter, "Is this mine?", ticks to no. That dissonance is expensive.

Success without self-authorship does not compound; it erodes.

The Mercenary Drift

Career change can feel like escape. Then another trap shows up: the mercenary circuit. You follow the pay, the benefits, the promotion ladder. You stay because the next rung is close and the package is good. But the work still does not belong to you. You become a traveler trading time and expertise for a living, not a maker building a life.

There are honest advantages here: mercenary seasons can pay school fees, skills, capital,



network. Sometimes you need that phase. Counterpoint: plenty of people find real purpose inside companies by carving out ownership within constraints. The line runs between authored versus inherited, not corporate versus independent.

Still, you feel the drift when your identity becomes a suitcase. You move from project to project, brand to brand, and nothing sticks to your name. A subtle hollowness grows: you can perform the role, but you cannot find yourself in it. That constitutes a signal, not a verdict.

Turning point: when your reasons for staying shrink to money and momentum, misalignment is running the show.

Defining Your Work

Words matter. “Work” represents the tasks you execute. “Your work” represents the pattern of value you author, the way you see, decide, build, and care that is distinctively yours. Authentic work lacks romance; it achieves alignment. It originates from your lived sense of what matters and how you contribute.

Practical tests:

- Ownership test: Would you sign your name to this if no one clapped?
- Intrinsic pull test: Do you feel drawn to the problem even when no one asks?
- Craft test: Does doing it make you sharper in a way you recognize as your craft-in-motion?
- Refusal test: What will you refuse to do, even if it pays? Boundaries signal authorship.

Field note: look for your signature moves. Not titles or tools, moves. The kind of problem you cannot stop diagnosing. The way you frame decisions. The standard you refuse to compromise. The through-line across jobs that felt oddly satisfying for reasons you did not have language for at the time.

Authentic work does not require a blank slate or a perfect plan. It asks for coherence: your choices begin to rhyme. You answer, in plain language, two questions:

1) What change do I reliably create? 2) For whom does that change matter enough to care?

When you can say it without fluff, you have crossed a threshold.



Building the Bridge Out

You do not have to torch the old life to start the new one. Build a bridge. Four moves, small, concrete, repeatable.

1) Audit your days for authorship

- For two weeks, note tasks that feel like “mine” versus “not mine.” No judgment. Just tally.
- Tag the “mine” tasks with the verb you were doing when time moved differently: mapping, distilling, negotiating, designing, troubleshooting, teaching, pattern-spotting.
- Scar lesson: the calendar is where misalignment hides. Put numbers to it.

2) Run 30-day, low-risk experiments

- Design one micro-project that concentrates your signature moves around a real problem and real person (or team). Scope so small you can complete it nights/weekends.
- Define success as learning: What worked? What fell flat? What surprised you?
- Deliver a visible artifact: a short report, a prototype, a playbook, a decision memo. Artifacts compound credibility.

3) Write a one-page value note

- Plain language, no marketing gloss. Sections: The problem I solve, Who it is for, How I do it (your moves), What it looks like (deliverables), Proof (a story or before/after), How to start (one small step).
- This is not a website. This represents a clarity tool. Share it with two trusted people and ask where it feels thin or inflated.

4) Renegotiate from the inside, or build a side channel

- Inside: Using your audit and value note, propose a 90-day pilot aligned to your moves. Ask for clear outcomes, autonomy, and a sunset clause. If “no,” you learned something about fit.
- Outside: Offer a tiny version of your value to one client or collaborator. Price it for learning. Deliver cleanly. Collect a testimonial grounded in outcomes, not adjectives.

Tactics that keep you honest:



- Set a weekly review: Did I do at least two hours of “my work”? If not, what blocked it?
- Keep a “stop doing” list. Add one item a week. Say no once a week, even if small.
- Name your next smallest experiment before you finish the current one. Momentum over drama.

This is the arc of return: you move from reaction to authorship in increments. No fireworks, just compound clarity.

Keeping the Door Open

Alignment lacks a finish line; it constitutes a practice. Systems help you keep the door from swinging shut again.

- Rhythm over bursts: Protect recurring, boring blocks where your work happens. If your calendar squeezes them out, misalignment will creep back in.
- Proof stack: Save every artifact that shows your value in the wild, screenshots, memos, before/after snapshots. A growing stack quiets impostor noise and anchors your pricing or negotiations.
- Boundary hygiene: Write down three hard nos. Revisit monthly. When offers show up that violate them, decline quickly and politely. Boundaries create shape; shape creates identity.
- People who see you: Cultivate two or three relationships where your work, not your title, is understood. Share drafts, not just wins. Let them challenge you when you drift.
- Meaning metrics: Besides money, track a small set of signals, energy after sessions, repeat pulls for the same kind of problem, unsolicited referrals, the ease of saying what you do. These show whether the work is becoming yours.

You do not need to be original in the cosmic sense. You need to be honest in the practical sense.

A quiet reminder: the originality most of us seek is simply the unmistakable fingerprint of our choices over time.

Conscious awareness: if you feel the cell closing again, zoom out. Did you trade authorship for short-term comfort? Did the role start dictating the story? Course-correct without drama. Small pivots keep you out of cages.



You can turn experience into meaningful purpose by making authorship a weekly habit, not a mystical event. Audit what belongs to you. Run small bets. Write what you do in plain language. Negotiate for autonomy. Protect the rhythm. That is how scars become maps, and maps become exits.

Prompt Guide

Copy and paste this prompt with ChatGPT and Memory or your favorite AI assistant that has relevant context about you.

Audit your last week of work and categorize each task as either “mine” (feels authored by you) or “not mine” (feels inherited or assigned). What patterns do you notice in the “mine” category?