

# CREATING AUTHENTIC, ENGAGED CULTURES: LESSONS FROM A SWAN

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

Over a hundred years ago, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a poem that has inspired me in my work of building authentic, engaged workplaces.

*This clumsy living that moves lumbering as if in ropes... reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks.*

*And to die, which is the letting go of the ground we stand and cling to every day,  
is like the swan, when he nervously lets himself down into the water, which receives him gaily and which flows joyfully under and after him, wave after wave,  
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm, is pleased to be carried, each moment more fully grown, more like a king, further and further on.*

The swan in this poem doesn't cure his awkwardness on the land by moving faster, working harder, beating himself up, being evaluated in a performance review, or by developing a better strategic plan. He frees himself from the stress of his environment simply by moving toward the element — water — where he belongs. Simple contact with the water breathes life into his tired body.

Touching the essential waters in your own life — discovering your authentic self — will change everything. As simple as this is, letting yourself down into the water from the familiarity of the ground you stand on can be difficult, especially if you think you might drown.

Employee engagement is really nothing more than this — creating safe places where people can connect with where they belong. Here are five lessons from the swan to start building workplaces more in line with your element — your authentic self:

1. Define your essential element, your authentic self. How would you articulate your “essential waters?” For the swan, it is water. What is it for you? In our most recent book, *Bridges of Trust: Making Accountability Authentic* (attached brochure), we offer a process for discovering what this is.
2. Be aware of when you are in your element. How do you know when you are in your element, when you are connected to your authentic self? What work do you do that feels so effortless, you lose track of time? When do you feel relaxed even in the midst of many demands? What do you do well that you don't remember learning?

3. Take a careful inventory of the last 100 hours spent working in your job. Be honest about what percentage of your time was spent in alignment with your authentic self. Consider the results of being at this number. Ask yourself if you are sincerely committed to raising this percentage. Take a close look at your job description. See if you would like to change any of it to better fit your temperament.
4. Have a courageous conversation with your boss (or people you are accountable to) about what you have learned by taking this inventory. See if he or she will support you to say “no” to some projects that may be outside your element, and “yes” to work that would be in greater alignment with your nature. If you are in a position of leadership, invite your direct reports to take this assessment and have this conversation with you.
5. In negotiating with your boss or those who may come to you as a boss, chose *service* over *self-interest*. Always think in terms of how you can add greater value to others.

Whether you are an artist, teacher, environmentalist, planner, healer, or builder, we all have the potential to be more engaged in our essential work. Even if you have already found the job of your dreams, there is a way of doing that job that will bring more life into it.

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