

The Power Beneath the Question

A Note on Fitness, Authority, and the Politics of Change in the Adaptive Fitness System

By Mario Aiello

Every fitness conversation is also a power conversation. The two are inseparable, and pretending otherwise is one of the ways organizations stay stuck.

When the Adaptive Fitness System asks what a change must be fit for, it sounds like a diagnostic question. It is. But it's also a political one. Fitness is never defined in a vacuum. Someone defines it. Someone enforces it. Someone else disputes it, quietly or loudly, and then either defers or doesn't. What looks like alignment on a change initiative is often one party's definition of fitness winning out over another's — not through argument, but through position.

This matters because most change efforts fail not at the level of design but at the level of contested definition. The initiative is technically coherent. The logic holds. And yet it stalls, gets quietly reshaped, or produces outcomes nobody recognizes as what they agreed to. Post-mortems call this "resistance" or "culture." It's usually neither. It's competing definitions of fitness that were never surfaced, held by people with different stakes and different proximity to the consequences.

The Four Questions — Fit for What, Fit by Whom, Fit How, Fit Until When — are diagnostic instruments. But they are also political instruments, because each question opens a space where contested interests become visible. Fit for What exposes whose purpose the change is serving. Fit by Whom asks who has standing to make that call. Fit How determines whose evidence counts. Fit Until When reveals who gets to declare the work done and move on, and who is left managing the aftermath.

Leaders who engage seriously with these questions often discover that what they called a change problem is actually a legitimacy problem. The people resisting the change aren't confused about what it is. They're clear about what it is, and they haven't agreed that it should be fit for what the leadership says it should be fit for. That's not irrational. That's politics operating exactly as it does.

Reverse Validation — the AFS principle that change must prove its fitness through outcomes rather than be imposed through authority — is where the power dynamic becomes most explicit. It shifts the burden of proof. Instead of asking people to trust that the change is good and comply in the meantime, it requires the change to earn its legitimacy through demonstrated results. That's a direct challenge to how most organizations actually operate, where authority is used to compress the period between announcement and compliance, and validation is retrospective if it happens at all.

A leader who adopts Reverse Validation isn't just choosing a methodology. They're relinquishing a form of power — the power to define success in advance and hold others accountable for achieving it. That's a significant thing to relinquish. It's worth being honest about what it costs, because leaders who adopt the language of validation without actually accepting its implications tend to produce the most corrosive outcomes: processes that look like inquiry but function as confirmation.

Now for the practitioner's position, because it belongs in this conversation too.

A practitioner working inside an organization is never neutral. They were hired by someone. That someone has a stake in how fitness gets defined, and it is almost never the same stake as everyone else in the room. This isn't a corruption of the diagnostic process — it's the condition the practitioner works inside. The question is whether they acknowledge it or pretend it away.

The AFS gives the practitioner a set of questions and a thinking discipline. It does not give them a position outside the organization's power dynamics. The embedded inquirer is embedded. The practitioner who walks in claiming objectivity is, at best, naïve. At worst, they're providing the legitimacy of independent analysis to a conclusion that was already decided. Both are available for hire.

What the practitioner can do — and what distinguishes the useful ones — is hold the diagnostic questions honestly even when the answers are uncomfortable for the person who hired them. This requires something that isn't in any approach: the willingness to say, in a room where someone has both the budget and the title, that what the organization is measuring as fitness isn't what the evidence suggests fitness requires. That conversation is political. It was political before the practitioner arrived. The practitioner's job is not to depoliticize it but to ensure the political contest happens in the open rather than underneath the language of neutral assessment.

The AFS doesn't resolve the practitioner's political position. It makes it legible. That's the most it can honestly do.

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