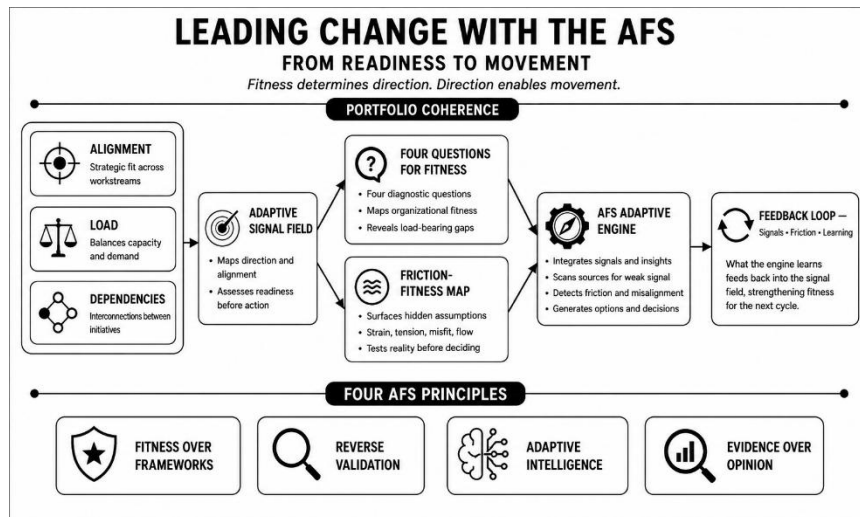


Leading Change with the AFS

From Readiness to Movement

By Mario Aiello



ABOUT THIS PAPER

There is a moment in most change programs — usually around month three — when someone in a senior position says the words "resistance to change." They say it the way people say "the weather." As if it were a fact of nature. As if the organization were doing something to them personally.

What they usually mean is: we designed a change, we announced the change, and the organization did not immediately become the change. Which is a different problem entirely.

This paper is about that different problem. It does not offer a methodology, a checklist, or a model with a satisfying acronym. What it offers instead is a diagnostic lens — the Adaptive Fitness System (AFS) — and an argument: that most change efforts fail not because of poor execution or insufficient sponsorship, but because they attempt movement before understanding the fitness state of the organization being moved.

I. The Usual Framing — and Why It Misleads

Change management as a discipline has produced a remarkable body of work. Kotter's eight steps. Prosci's ADKAR. McKinsey's influence model. Each has genuine insight. Each has also produced, at scale, a particular kind of failure — the kind where everything was done correctly and the change still did not take.

The problem is structural. Most change management approaches treat the organization as a neutral container. Pour the change in. Stir. Apply heat in the form of urgency. Wait. The container does not change the contents; it simply holds them until transformation occurs.

Organizations are not neutral containers. They have histories, patterns, load-bearing assumptions, and invisible weight-bearing walls. They have ways of deciding that nobody wrote down and ways of not-deciding that everybody knows. They have fitness states — and those fitness states are not random. They are the accumulated result of every strategic choice, every cultural norm, every structural decision that came before.

Change management applied without fitness awareness is like a physiotherapist prescribing an exercise regimen without first assessing the patient. The exercises might be excellent. The patient might not be in a position to do them.

The Adaptive Fitness System starts from a different assumption: before you design a change, you need to understand what the organization can currently bear. Not just its capacity — its fitness profile. Where it is strong. Where it is compensating. Where it is brittle beneath a surface that looks fine.

II. Change Readiness as a Fitness Question

The phrase "change readiness" has been almost entirely captured by survey methodology. You ask people whether they understand the change, whether they support it, whether they feel leadership is committed. You score the results. You declare a readiness level. You proceed.

This is not readiness. This is sentiment.

The AFS offers a different frame. Readiness is not a feeling people have about a change. It is the fitness state of an organization relative to the demands that change will place on it.

The AFS organizes fitness across four dimensions:

Fitness for Purpose

Does the organization understand clearly why it exists and what it is optimizing for? Change programs frequently fail because they collide with an unarticulated organizational identity. The organization cannot absorb the change because the change contradicts something it is — not something it believes, but something it is. When fitness for purpose is low, change efforts trigger identity anxiety, not resistance.

Fitness for Context

Can the organization read its environment accurately and adapt its understanding as conditions shift? This is the sensing capacity. Organizations with low fitness for context are not unintelligent; they are informationally isolated. They receive signals and interpret them through outdated models. A change program that assumes the organization understands why the change is necessary will fail here if the organizational model of the environment is wrong.

Fitness for Execution

Can the organization convert decisions into action reliably? This is the implementation substrate. Not enthusiasm, not alignment, not buy-in — the mechanical ability to move from agreed upon to done. Many change programs collapse in the gap between intent and execution not because of opposition but because the execution capability is genuinely insufficient. The organization wants to change and cannot.

Fitness for Improvement

Can the organization learn while it moves? Can it detect when the change is not working and adjust, rather than doubling down or abandoning? This is the adaptation capacity. Without it, change programs either become religious commitments — we will persist regardless of evidence — or casualties of the first significant setback.

These four dimensions interact. An organization that is highly fit for execution but low on context fitness will implement changes efficiently in the wrong direction. An organization with strong purpose fitness but weak execution fitness will articulate a compelling change story and then fail to deliver it. The fitness profile — the pattern across all four dimensions — determines what a change program needs to account for before it is designed.

Change readiness is not a scalar. It is not a percentage. It is a four-dimensional profile, and any change program that treats it otherwise is planning on the basis of incomplete information.

III. The Diagnostic Layer: Reading the Organization Before Moving It

The AFS Level 1 instruments were not designed specifically for change leadership, but they are ideally suited to it. Their purpose is diagnostic: to surface the fitness state of an organization before intervention, not to prescribe what the intervention should be. Used as pre-change instruments, they reframe the entire planning sequence.

The Adaptive Signal Field

The Adaptive Signal Field maps the organization against two axes: direction — how clearly does the organization understand where it is going — and alignment — how coherently are its parts moving in that direction. In a change context, it surfaces a problem that most change programs discover too late: the organization is not a unified actor.

A change program designed for an organization that scores high on direction and high on alignment will fail if applied to an organization that scores high on direction and low on alignment. The former needs execution support. The latter needs coherence work before execution begins. The Signal Field tells you which situation you are in before you start.

Reading the field also means running the Four Questions for Fitness across it — a load-bearing assessment, not asking whether the organization wants to change, but whether it can. The four questions strip away sentiment and surface structural fitness. The answers identify which fitness dimensions will constrain the change program and which will support it.

The Four Questions are deliberately uncomfortable. Organizations with significant fitness gaps tend to answer them aspirationally rather than accurately. Part of the practitioner's work is holding the frame: these questions ask about current reality, not intended state.

The Friction-Fitness Map

The Friction-Fitness Map asks a question that almost no change program asks: how do you know what you think you know? It surfaces the assumptions an organization is treating as facts, and sorts what it finds into where the organization is straining, where the tension is productive, where a misfit is hiding in plain sight, and where things are, for now, genuinely working. In a change context, this matters because most change programs are built on assumptions — about why the change is needed, about what the current state actually is, about how stakeholders will respond, about what success looks like.

The Map does not invalidate those assumptions. It makes them visible and places them, so they can be tested before they become the foundation of a change program that collapses when reality does not cooperate.

The AFS Adaptive Engine

The Adaptive Engine maps the operating logic of the organization — how it actually moves from intention to outcome. This is the execution substrate. In a change context, understanding the Adaptive Engine is essential because change programs frequently assume an execution capacity the organization does not have. It surfaces where the gaps are: not in motivation, not in leadership commitment, but in the actual mechanics of how things get done.

Together, these three stages give the change leader something unusual: a pre-movement picture of the organization's fitness state. Not a sentiment survey. Not a stakeholder map. A structural assessment of what the organization can currently bear, where it is strong, and where it is fragile.

The diagnostic sequence before a change program is straightforward: run the instruments, synthesize the fitness profile, design the change program in light of that profile. The sequence is not revolutionary. What is unusual is insisting on it before the program design begins rather than discovering the fitness gaps after the program has launched.

IV. Building the Capability Response

Diagnosis alone does not lead change. It informs the design of the response. Once the fitness profile is clear, the question becomes: what does this organization need to develop — or develop further — to make this change possible?

This is where the AFS introduces a design discipline that precedes program execution: Fitness-Driven Design (F-DD).

F-DD operates on three principles. First, design starts with friction — the points where the fitness profile predicts the change will encounter structural resistance, places where the organization's current fitness state is insufficient for what the change demands. Second, design is constrained by what the organization can currently bear — not what it should be able to bear, not what it bore in a previous change cycle, but what it can actually sustain given its present fitness state. Third, design builds fitness incrementally rather than assuming it — the change program is not just delivering an outcome; it is building the organizational capacity to sustain and extend that outcome.

Applied to change leadership, F-DD re-sequences the conventional program design logic. Instead of starting with the desired end state and working backwards to a plan, it starts with the current fitness state and works forward to what the organization can absorb in each phase.

The specific capabilities an organization needs to develop depend on where its fitness profile shows gaps. The instruments surface the pattern; what follows is how different fitness gap configurations translate into different capability priorities.

When the gap is in Purpose

The priority capability is clarity work — before anything else. Change programs launched into an organization with purpose confusion will be interpreted through multiple incompatible lenses by different parts of the organization. No amount of communication resolves this; the confusion is not about information, it is about identity. The capability response here is structured sense-making:

creating the conditions in which the organization can arrive at a genuinely shared understanding of what it is for, before the change program asks it to move.

When the gap is in Context

The priority capability is sense amplification. The organization is not ignoring signals; it is not receiving them clearly, or it is interpreting them through models that no longer apply. The capability response involves creating deliberate feedback loops — structured exposure to the reality the change is responding to, so the organization develops an accurate model of its own situation before it is asked to act on that model.

When the gap is in Execution

The priority capability is execution infrastructure. This is often misdiagnosed as a skills problem or a motivation problem. It is usually a flow problem: the way work moves through the organization creates friction that no amount of individual effort can overcome. The capability response involves addressing the structural causes of execution failure — decision latency, unclear ownership, handoff failures, competing priorities that are never reconciled — before the change program adds further load to an already strained system.

When the gap is in Improvement

The priority capability is adaptive feedback. Change programs that cannot adjust to what they are learning are not change programs; they are implementation programs with a fixed endpoint. The capability response builds the mechanisms for real-time learning: short feedback cycles, decision rights that allow course correction without requiring escalation, and a cultural permission to update the plan on the basis of evidence.

In most organizations, the fitness gap is not in a single dimension. The profile shows a pattern — and the capability response needs to address the pattern, not the individual gaps in isolation. This is why the diagnostic work is load-bearing: without it, capability development efforts address symptoms rather than the fitness state that is producing them.

V. Orchestrating Competing Change Pressures

Organizations rarely face one change at a time. More commonly, they face a portfolio of change demands — regulatory compliance, technology modernization, cultural transformation, market repositioning — each with its own logic, its own timeline, and its own claim on organizational capacity.

This is where change leadership frequently breaks down, not because any individual change is poorly designed, but because the organization is attempting to move in multiple directions simultaneously without a portfolio logic that makes that possible.

The AFS addresses this through Portfolio Management, which treats competing change demands not as a scheduling problem but as a WHY collision problem. Different change streams typically reflect different organizational purposes, or different interpretations of the same purpose. When they are managed as independent workstreams, they create contradictory demands on the organization's fitness. The organization is simultaneously being asked to be more efficient and more experimental, more standardized and more adaptive, more centralized and more autonomous.

The WHY collision problem is not solved by prioritization in the conventional sense. It is solved by asking a prior question: what is the organization actually optimizing for, and how do the competing change demands relate to that central purpose?

Portfolio Management introduces a portfolio-level fitness lens. Each change demand is assessed not just for its individual merits but for its fitness load — the demand it places on the organization's fitness profile — and its WHY alignment — how it relates to the organization's core purpose. Change demands that are high in WHY alignment and compatible in fitness load can be pursued simultaneously. Change demands that create contradictory fitness loads cannot be, regardless of how important each appears individually.

This reframes the change portfolio conversation from "which of these should we do?" to "what is our actual fitness capacity, and what combination of changes is this organization capable of absorbing coherently?" It is a more honest conversation, and it produces different decisions than the standard prioritization exercise.

The practical implication for change leaders is that the portfolio view must precede program design. Individual change programs — well-designed and well-executed — can still collectively overwhelm an organization whose fitness state cannot sustain the combined load. The Portfolio Management lens prevents this by making the portfolio load visible before it becomes a crisis.

VI. What This Doesn't Solve

Intellectual honesty about the limits of any approach is part of what makes it useful. The AFS diagnostic instruments are strong tools for surfacing fitness states. They are not substitutes for practitioner judgment, and they do not solve everything.

The measurement problem

The fitness dimensions are real, but they are not easily quantifiable. The AFS instruments are sense-making tools, not measurement systems. Two experienced practitioners using the same instruments with the same organization may surface a similar fitness profile and interpret it differently. This is not a deficiency — it is the nature of organizational diagnosis. But it means the instruments require practitioners who can hold ambiguity, synthesize imperfect information, and make calibrated judgments. They do not produce algorithmic outputs.

The time problem

Proper diagnostic work takes time that change programs frequently do not believe they have. The argument that "we can't afford to do the fitness assessment before we start" is common and almost always wrong — but it is not easy to counter in an environment where urgency is real. The diagnostic sequence the AFS recommends is not a luxury for well-resourced programs. It is the cost of not launching a well-designed program into an organization that cannot receive it. The alternative is discovering the fitness gaps after the program has launched, which is more expensive and more damaging.

The political problem

Fitness diagnostics surface truths that organizations sometimes prefer not to surface. Low fitness for purpose, made visible and explicit, implicates leadership decisions. Low fitness for context can indict the organization's information environment and the structures that maintain it. The AFS instruments are not politically neutral. Using them requires a level of organizational courage — and organizational safety — that is not always present. A practitioner who surfaces a damaging fitness

diagnosis in a context where the organization cannot act on it has not helped. This is a judgment call that no instrument resolves.

The practitioner dependency

The AFS is an approach, not a framework. It is designed to require judgment, not to replace it. This is a deliberate design choice. But it means the quality of outcomes depends substantially on the quality of the practitioner applying the instruments. The instruments guide — they do not decide.

VII. Bridge

This paper sits at the intersection of the AFS's diagnostic level and its capability development level. It is not a Level 1 paper and not a Level 2 paper — it is an argument for reading the two levels together when the question is organizational change.

The fitness dimensions described in the Adaptive Signal Field, the Friction-Fitness Map, and the AFS Adaptive Engine are not change management tools in the conventional sense. They are organizational mirrors. They show the organization to itself before it moves — which is, in the end, the only responsible starting point for leading change.

Change is not something done to an organization. It is something an organization does, or cannot do, based on its current fitness state. The practitioner's work is to understand that state clearly, design a response proportionate to what the organization can bear, and build the capability — incrementally, honestly, without the consolation of premature certainty — to sustain movement over time.

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