

Fitness, Judgment, Inquiry

A Pragmatist Account of What Organizational Adaptation Actually Requires

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ABSTRACT

In general organizational improvement approaches rest on an unexamined philosophical assumption: that organizations have a correct state specifiable in advance, toward which they can be systematically moved. This paper argues that assumption is not merely impractical — it is epistemically incoherent. Drawing on the pragmatist tradition, particularly the work of John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce, it develops a different account: organizational fitness is an irreducibly relational judgment, made under conditions, by an inquirer embedded in those conditions. No model can make that judgment in advance. The Adaptive Fitness System (AFS) is presented as an approach grounded in this pragmatist epistemology — one in which inquiry, not installation, is the primary mode of engagement.

The Assumption Nobody Examines

There is a founding assumption underneath virtually every organizational improvement approach, and it is rarely stated explicitly because it feels so obviously true: organizations have a knowable correct state. That state can be described. A gap between the current state and the correct state can be measured. And a methodology — a framework, a set of practices, a transformation roadmap — can close that gap.

This assumption is so deeply embedded in the consulting and management literature that it has become invisible. It shows up in maturity models that rank organizations on a universal scale from naive to excellent. It shows up in agile frameworks that specify ceremonies, roles, and artifacts as the right way to organize work. It shows up in digital transformation programs that define a target operating model before anyone has spent serious time understanding what the organization is actually doing and why. It shows up, most insidiously, in the language of best practice — the idea that a practice demonstrated to work well in one context carries prescriptive force in another.

Call this the ideal-type fallacy: the belief that organizational excellence has a form, and that the practitioner's job is to bring the organization into alignment with that form. The fallacy is not that forms are useless — models and frameworks can be heuristically valuable — but that the form is prior to the inquiry. The model comes first. The organization is then interpreted through it.

The consequences are familiar to anyone who has spent serious time in organizational work. Teams adopt practices that make no sense in their context because the framework requires them. Leaders declare transformations complete when the

vocabulary has changed but the work has not. Practitioners find themselves defending methodology rather than attending to what is actually happening. The form has colonized the inquiry.

This paper proposes a different starting point. Organizational fitness is not a property that organizations have or fail to have relative to an ideal. It is a *judgment* — irreducibly relational, made under conditions, by an inquirer who is inside the situation being assessed. That shift has philosophical roots. Understanding those roots helps explain why it matters, and what an approach grounded in them looks like in practice.

Dewey and the Transaction of Inquiry

John Dewey spent most of his philosophical career dismantling a picture of knowledge that had governed Western epistemology since Descartes: the idea that the knowing subject stands apart from the world it knows, representing that world in the mind, and comparing those representations against reality to determine truth.

Dewey called this the spectator theory of knowledge, and he argued that it was not just wrong but practically dangerous. It implies that good thinking is thinking that gets its representations right before it acts — that the order is: know first, then do. Applied to organizations, this becomes: diagnose against the model first, then intervene. The model is the reference point. Experience is the problem to be brought into alignment.

Dewey's alternative begins with a different unit of analysis. He called it the transaction — the ongoing, mutually constituting relationship between organism and environment. Organisms don't stand apart from environments and represent them; they are in continuous transactional relationship with them, shaped by and shaping what surrounds them. Knowledge doesn't precede this transaction; it emerges from it.

This has a specific implication for what inquiry is and how it works. Inquiry, for Dewey, begins not with a question but with a disruption — what he called an indeterminate situation. Something is wrong. The flow of activity has been interrupted. The organism is in difficulty. Inquiry is the process of resolving that difficulty, not by applying a pre-formed answer, but by transforming the situation through engaged, experimental action.

The resolution is not a return to a prior state. It is the establishment of a *unified situation* — one in which the organism can act effectively again. What counts as resolution is not defined by a model external to the situation. It is defined by the situation itself, by what the difficulty was and what would make it tractable. This is what Dewey means when he says that inquiry is controlled by its subject matter.

Translated into organizational terms: you cannot determine what fitness means for an organization before you are in serious contact with what that organization is actually doing, what pressures it is under, what it has tried, what it has learned, and what it needs to be able to do next. A model can help you ask better questions. It cannot answer them. The answering is always situational.

This is not a rejection of expertise or structured thinking. Dewey was not an anti-intellectualist. He was insisting that expertise serves inquiry — it does not replace it. The practitioner who brings a model into an organization and fits the organization to the model has inverted the relationship between knowledge and experience. They are using a tool as a destination.

Peirce and the Logic of Abduction

If Dewey gives us the philosophical account of why inquiry must be transactional, Charles Sanders Peirce gives us the logical structure of how good inquiry actually works when the situation is genuinely uncertain.

Peirce distinguished three modes of inference. Deduction draws necessary conclusions from premises: if all A are B and this is A, then this is B. Induction generalizes from observed cases to probable rules. But neither of these, Peirce argued, accounts for how we actually generate new hypotheses — how we arrive at the conjecture that this might be what is going on here.

That third mode he called abduction. Abduction is the inference to the best available explanation. It is not deductively valid — the conclusion doesn't follow necessarily from the premises. It is not inductive — it doesn't generalize from many cases. It reasons from a surprising or anomalous observation backward to the hypothesis that would, if true, make that observation intelligible. Peirce's formulation: the surprising fact C is observed; but if A were true, C would be a matter of course; therefore there is reason to suspect that A is true.

Abduction is inherently provisional and revisable. The hypothesis it generates must be tested — through deductive elaboration of what else would follow if it were true, and through inductive verification of those consequences in experience. But without abduction, inquiry cannot begin. You cannot test a hypothesis you haven't formed. And you cannot form a hypothesis by deduction alone.

The diagnostic questions at the center of the AFS are abductive moves. When a practitioner asks what the organization is fit for, fit by whose judgment, fit by what means, and fit until when — these are not checklist items. They are structured provocations designed to generate the best available hypothesis about the situation. They press toward the conjecture that, if true, would make the current state of affairs intelligible.

This matters because it changes the practitioner's relationship to their own conclusions. An abductive reasoner does not arrive at a diagnosis and defend it. They arrive at a hypothesis and test it — against what the work reveals, against what the people inside the situation know that the practitioner doesn't, against what happens when you try something and observe the response. The hypothesis is held provisionally, not because the practitioner lacks confidence, but because that is the epistemically correct relationship to a conclusion reached under uncertainty.

Peirce also made a distinction that is directly relevant here. He argued that genuine inquiry — inquiry that has a chance of reaching truth — must begin with genuine doubt, not manufactured doubt. Genuine doubt is the actual disruption of a belief by experience. Manufactured doubt is the skeptical exercise of doubting what you actually believe in order to rebuild it on firmer foundations. Cartesian doubt is manufactured. *Something is actually wrong here* is genuine.

The AFS diagnostic entry point assumes genuine doubt. It is not a framework that organizations adopt when things are going well and they want to improve. It is an approach that becomes useful when something is actually disrupted — when the organization's current capability is no longer adequate to what it needs to do. The Four Questions for Fitness don't create the problem. They locate it, and locate it precisely enough that inquiry can begin.

The Phenomenological Posture

There is a third philosophical thread in the AFS, thinner than the pragmatist core but worth naming. It comes from phenomenology — specifically from Edmund Husserl's insistence on returning to the things themselves.

Husserl was responding to a tendency in the science of his time to substitute theoretical constructs for direct experience. The theoretical account of perception, for example, was taken to be more real or more fundamental than the experience of perceiving. Husserl's method of bracketing — the epoché — was designed to suspend those theoretical overlays and recover access to what is actually presenting itself in experience, before interpretation.

Applied to organizational work, this suggests a discipline of attending to what is actually happening before reaching for the model that explains it. The practitioner who enters an organization already knowing what the problem is — because the symptoms match a pattern they have seen before — has foreclosed inquiry before it begins. The model has replaced the phenomenon.

This phenomenological posture is a starting discipline, not a sustained method. The AFS does not recommend that practitioners remain indefinitely in pure description before theorizing. It moves quickly from sensing to interpreting to acting, because organizational situations are live — they don't wait for the inquirer to finish observing.

But the posture of attending before explaining, of letting the situation present itself before assigning it to a category, is a genuine epistemic discipline. It is what separates a practitioner who learns from a situation from one who merely confirms what they expected to find.

In this sense the phenomenological thread and the pragmatist core reinforce each other. Dewey's transactional account of inquiry requires genuine contact with the situation — the kind of contact that phenomenological attention enables. Peirce's abductive logic requires that the surprising observation actually be surprising — which it can only be if the practitioner has not already explained it away.

Fitness, Judgment, Inquiry

The three threads — Deweyan transaction, Peircean abduction, phenomenological attention — converge on a single claim that is the philosophical core of this paper: organizational fitness is not a property, it is a judgment.

A property is something an organization has or doesn't have, independent of the inquirer who is assessing it. An organization is either agile or it isn't. It either meets the maturity model criteria or it falls short. The practitioner's job is to measure the gap between the property as it stands and the property as it should be. The judgment is essentially clerical: apply the criteria, record the result.

A judgment is something different. It is an assessment made by an inquirer embedded in conditions, drawing on available evidence, using trained perception developed through experience, under genuine uncertainty about outcomes. It cannot be made before the inquiry. It cannot be delegated to a model. It is irreducibly the act of a practitioner who is actually inside the situation.

This does not make judgment arbitrary. Judgment can be better or worse, more or less calibrated, more or less informed by relevant evidence. Dewey's inquiry is structured — it follows the logic of problem identification, hypothesis formation, testing, and resolution. Peirce's abduction is constrained — the hypothesis must actually account for the surprising fact. The judgment that results from disciplined inquiry is not a guess. But it is still a judgment, not a measurement.

The practical implication is significant. If fitness is a judgment, then the practitioner's central competence is not mastery of a model — it is the capacity to inquire well. That means attending carefully to what is actually presenting, generating hypotheses that are genuinely explanatory, testing them against experience, revising them as the situation develops, and holding conclusions with the appropriate degree of confidence given the evidence available.

It also means that the organization is not the passive object of the practitioner's expertise. It is a participant in the inquiry. The people inside the organization know

things the practitioner doesn't — things about history, culture, power, what has been tried and failed, what the informal logic of the place actually is. The practitioner who treats this knowledge as noise to be filtered out in favor of model-based diagnosis is not being rigorous. They are being epistemically careless.

The AFS Compass, the Validation Lens, the Adaptive Intelligence loop — these are tools for structured inquiry, not templates for correct answers. They guide the practitioner's attention toward the dimensions of organizational life most likely to be diagnostic. They do not tell the practitioner what they will find. The finding is always *this* organization, *this* situation, *this* judgment.

What This Means for Practice

The philosophical argument has direct consequences for how organizational work is done — and for what it means to do it well.

The practitioner is an inquirer, not an installer.

If fitness is a judgment made under conditions, then the practitioner's primary obligation is to the quality of their inquiry, not to the fidelity of their model. This is a different kind of professional identity. The installer arrives knowing what needs to be done and executes it. The inquirer arrives with structured attention and trained perception, commits to genuine contact with the situation, and arrives at conclusions through engagement rather than prior specification.

This does not make the practitioner passive or undirected. Inquiry has structure. The Four Questions for Fitness are not open-ended musings — they are the precise provocations needed to generate a diagnostic hypothesis. But the structure serves the inquiry. It does not replace it.

Sequencing is not a timeline — it is a logical dependency.

The AFS moves through distinct domains of inquiry in a specific order — from purpose and fitness diagnosis, through design logic, operational dynamics, and finally systemic sustainability. That order is not arbitrary and it is not a project plan. It reflects logical dependencies: you cannot design for fitness before you understand what fitness means in this context; you cannot sustain what you have not first stabilized; you cannot sense across system boundaries before you have developed the capacity to sense within them.

This is a pragmatist insight. The sequence follows the structure of the problem, not the preferences of the practitioner or the sales cycle of the engagement. Dewey would recognize it: inquiry is controlled by its subject matter.

Validation is continuous, not terminal.

The Validation Lens in the AFS reflects a specifically pragmatist understanding of what it means to confirm a hypothesis. You do not validate a design or a practice once, at the end, by comparing it against a standard. You validate continuously, by attending to what the work produces, what the situation reveals as you engage it, and what the people inside it report about what is actually happening.

This is Peirce's logic of inquiry applied to organizational practice. The hypothesis is tested through its consequences. The consequences are observed. The hypothesis is revised. The inquiry continues. There is no point at which the practitioner can say: the model has been confirmed, the work is done. There is only the ongoing transaction between the approach and the situation it is engaging.

The Fitness Dial is not a target — it is a reading instrument.

The Fitness Dial — the central diagnostic instrument of the AFS — is sometimes misread as a prescription: you should be here on the dial, and the work is to move you there. That reading collapses back into the ideal-type fallacy. The Dial is a reading instrument. It gives the practitioner a way to locate the organization's current adaptive posture relative to the demands being placed on it. Where the dial should point is determined by what the organization needs to be able to do — and that determination is part of the inquiry, not a premise given before it begins.

The Tradition the AFS Belongs To

The argument of this paper places the AFS within a specific intellectual tradition — not as an application of that tradition, but as a convergent development that draws on the same epistemological insights.

The pragmatist tradition — Peirce, James, Dewey, and their successors — developed in explicit opposition to what Dewey called the spectator theory of knowledge. Knowledge is not a representation of a prior reality. It is a tool for living — for navigating the genuine uncertainty of situations that resist easy resolution. Inquiry is not the application of method to data. It is the transformation of indeterminate situations into determinate ones through disciplined experimental engagement.

This tradition has been enormously influential in philosophy and has had significant, if underacknowledged, influence on the social sciences. It surfaces in Donald Schön's account of the reflective practitioner — the professional who learns from the back-talk of the situation rather than simply applying technical rationality. It surfaces in Karl Weick's organizational sensemaking — the idea that organizations do not simply process information about environments, they enact those environments through their interpretive activity. It surfaces in complexity science's insistence that complex adaptive systems cannot be managed from the outside toward a predetermined state.

The AFS is at home in this tradition. It did not emerge from reading Dewey. It emerged from twenty-five years of sustained engagement with organizations that did not behave as models predicted they would — and from the gradual recognition that the problem was not in the organizations but in the epistemic assumptions underlying the models. The philosophical argument in this paper is a reconstruction of what the practice already implied.

That reconstruction matters because it changes what the AFS is. It is not a better framework. It is a different kind of thing — an inquiry approach grounded in a coherent account of how knowledge of complex situations is actually possible, and what that means for the practitioner who is responsible for making it.

Closing: The Question That Does Not Simplify

Fit for what? That question does not simplify as you engage it. It becomes more precise, more situated, more particular to this organization at this moment under these conditions. That is not a failure of the question. That is what a good diagnostic question does.

The ideal-type approach promises simplification: here is the model, here is where you are, here is the gap, here is the path. The pragmatist approach makes a different promise: here is a way of inquiring that will help you understand what is actually happening and what might actually help. The first promise is easier to sell. The second is more likely to be true.

Organizational fitness is an irreducibly relational judgment. It is made under conditions, by an inquirer embedded in those conditions, through disciplined engagement with what the situation actually presents. No model makes that judgment. No framework installs it. The practitioner makes it — or they do not make it at all, and what gets called improvement is only the *appearance* of improvement: vocabulary changed, practices adopted, transformation declared.

The AFS is an approach designed for practitioners who want to make the judgment, not evade it. Its philosophical home is in the pragmatist tradition — in the insistence that knowledge is always knowledge under conditions, that inquiry is always inquiry from inside a situation, and that fitness is never a property of an organization in isolation but always a relationship between what an organization can do and what it actually needs to do.

Start with the Fitness Dial. Pull what you need. Do not install a framework.

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