

What You're Engaging

A leader's introduction to the Adaptive Fitness System

By Mario Aiello



The Thing Is Not the Problem

At some point in my consulting career I stopped counting how many leaders hired me to fix something they had already decided was broken. The thing was usually agile. Sometimes it was the teams. Occasionally it was a framework someone had installed two years earlier that had not yet delivered the transformation promised on the slide deck.

I would arrive, look at the thing, and think: the thing is fine. The thing is doing exactly what the conditions around it make possible. The thing is not the problem.

This is not a comfortable observation to deliver. It is also not what anyone hired me to say.

The Adaptive Fitness System starts with a different question. Not what is broken, but what is this organization actually being asked to do — and is it designed to do that. The instrument for that question is called the Fitness Dial. It looks deceptively simple. It is not asking about your

processes or your ceremonies or your delivery cadence. It is asking about alignment. Between intent and design. Between what leadership decided and what the organization can carry.

That question has a way of including the people who commissioned the diagnostic.

Which is worth knowing before you begin.

What a Reading Requires

The Fitness Dial does not produce a report. It produces a reading — and readings require interpretation. That is not a limitation of the instrument. It is the point.

Most diagnostic tools are designed to generate findings that travel without the diagnostician. You commission a maturity assessment, a capability review, an agile health check. Someone collects data, scores it, formats it into something that can be presented to a steering committee and filed afterward. The diagnostician leaves. The document stays.

The Fitness Dial works differently because organizational fitness is not a fixed property. It is a relationship between what an organization is structured to do and what its environment is currently demanding. That relationship shifts. It is also not evenly visible from any single vantage point — not from the teams, not from middle management, not from the executive layer. Each position in the organization sees a different part of the signal. The practitioner's job is to triangulate across those positions and surface what none of them can see alone.

This is where the leader's role in the engagement becomes consequential.

The reading the Fitness Dial produces is only as complete as the access and candor the engagement makes possible. A practitioner working with restricted access, filtered information, or a leader who has already decided what the findings should be is not conducting a diagnostic. They are conducting a confirmation. The instrument can tell the difference. It just cannot fix it.

What a full engagement requires from a leader is not agreement in advance. It is willingness to be in the frame — to treat the diagnostic as something that includes their decisions, their organizational design choices, their stated priorities and the distance between those priorities and what the organization is actually rewarded for doing.

That distance is usually where the Fitness Dial finds the most useful signal.

What Orientation Makes Possible

What changes when a leader engages this way is not the quality of the findings. It is the quality of what can be done with them.

Conventional consulting produces recommendations. Recommendations require a decision-maker to evaluate them, approve them, sponsor them, and then watch what happens when they meet the organization. By the time that sequence completes, the conditions that generated the original findings have often shifted. The recommendation is answering a question the organization has already moved past.

The Fitness Dial is not trying to produce recommendations. It is trying to produce orientation. A shared understanding, between practitioner and leader, of where the organization actually is — not where the strategy deck says it is, not where last quarter's retrospective suggested it might be heading, but where it is. What it can carry. What it cannot. Where the load is misplaced and where the design is simply being asked to do something it was never built to do.

That orientation is a different kind of output. It does not file well. It does not present cleanly to a steering committee. What it does is change the quality of every subsequent decision the leader makes about the organization — because those decisions are now grounded in something more accurate than assumption, aspiration, or inherited narrative.

This is what an AFS engagement makes possible that a conventional consulting approach structurally cannot. Not because the practitioners are more capable, but because the approach is not trying to produce a deliverable. It is trying to produce clarity. And clarity, in an organization of any complexity, is not a document. It is a condition — one that has to be earned through the kind of engagement this paper has been describing.

The Fitness Dial is where that engagement begins. What it surfaces depends on what both parties bring to it.

A Final Honesty

I should say, for the sake of honesty, that not every leader who encounters the Fitness Dial finds this useful.

Some find it uncomfortable. The instrument has a way of surfacing things that were easier to attribute to the teams, or to the methodology, or to the implementation. When it surfaces them as design conditions — as the predictable output of decisions that made sense at the time and are now producing results nobody intended — that is a different kind of conversation than most consulting engagements prepare leaders for.

Some find it inconclusive. There is no moment where the Fitness Dial declares the organization fixed. There is no certification. There is no framework installed. There is a clearer picture of

where the organization stands and what that implies. What happens next is still a leadership decision.

This is not a paper designed to convince anyone. If the way this approach works sounds like what your organization needs, an AFS practitioner can tell you fairly quickly whether the conditions for a useful engagement exist. If it sounds like something you would rather not deal with right now, that is also useful information — and the Fitness Dial, had you engaged it, would probably have surfaced why.

Either way, the question it starts with remains.

What is this organization actually being asked to do — and is it designed to do that.

It is a simple question. It is almost never a comfortable one.

More AFS papers: [AFS Library](#)

Licensed CC BY 4.0 — share freely with attribution