

Fitness-Washing

When the Vocabulary Outruns the Diagnostic

By Mario Aiello – Adaptive Ways

There is a particular kind of meeting where someone says the word "fit" four times and nothing has been measured once. Nobody in the room notices, because the word is doing exactly what it was hired to do. It sounds like rigor. It costs nothing to say.

That word is not an accident. It is the most portable piece of vocabulary the Adaptive Fitness System has produced, and portability is a mixed blessing. A term light enough to travel is also light enough to be picked up by someone who has no intention of doing the diagnostic that earns it. This paper is about that theft, what it looks like, and why the AFS is structurally more exposed to it than most of what it critiques.

What the Word Is Being Asked to Do

Fitness-Washing is the use of AFS-adjacent language, fit for purpose, diagnostic, adaptive, evidence-based, to describe a decision that was never actually tested against evidence. The decision came first. The vocabulary arrived afterward, as varnish.

This is not the same failure as a bad diagnosis. A bad diagnosis is an honest attempt that got the reading wrong, mismeasured context, misjudged a signal, applied the Four Questions carelessly. Fitness-Washing skips the attempt. It borrows the authority of diagnosis without paying its cost, which is the willingness to be told something you didn't want to hear.

The tell is always the same, once you know to look for it: the fitness language shows up after the decision, not before it. "We decided to consolidate the platform teams, and it's a good fit for where we're headed" is not a diagnostic finding. It's a press release wearing a lab coat.

How It Happens Without Anyone Lying

Nobody sets out to do this. That's what makes it durable. Fitness-Washing doesn't require bad faith, it requires time pressure, a sponsor who has already committed politically, and a vocabulary sitting on the shelf that sounds better than "we didn't have time to check." The AFS words get reached for the same way any organization reaches for the nearest available legitimacy. It's not theft with intent. It's theft of convenience.

Three patterns account for most of it. The first is retrofit: a decision is made, and the Four Questions are answered afterward, quietly, in whatever direction supports the decision already taken. The second is selective reading: a real diagnostic is run, produces a mixed or negative signal, and only the favorable third of it survives into the leadership deck. The third is scale-borrowing: a diagnostic genuinely run on one team is presented as though it speaks for the division, because the vocabulary doesn't visibly shrink when the sample does.

None of these require malice. All three require only that the diagnostic take longer, or say something more inconvenient, than the decision can wait for.

Why AFS Is a Soft Target for This

Here is the uncomfortable part, and it belongs in this series rather than a marketing page: AFS is more exposed to being washed than a framework would be, not less.

A framework is hard to counterfeit convincingly, because it has steps. Skip a ceremony and it's visible — the retrospective didn't happen, the board is empty, everyone in the room knows something is missing. AFS doesn't have that kind of visible scaffolding. Its output is language and judgment, not artefacts. That is precisely the design choice “The Canon Problem” defends, the approach doesn't reduce degrees of freedom the way a framework does. But the same absence of scaffolding means that saying the words costs nothing and looks like everything. There is no empty board to notice.

This is the AFS's own error typology talking to itself. Fitness-Washing is a coherent-but-misapplied failure with an incoherent one hiding inside it: the vocabulary is used correctly in form and emptied of the thing it was built to require. It reads as fluency. It functions as camouflage.

What Actually Defends Against It

Two of the Guardrails exist for exactly this, though neither was written with washing specifically in mind. “No Redesign Without a Fitness Signal” rules out the retrofit pattern directly, if the signal came after the decision, it isn't a signal, it's a caption. “Language Must Remain Testable” rules out the other two, a claim of fitness that can't be falsified, or that quietly narrows its own sample size without saying so, has stopped being testable the moment nobody's allowed to check it.

The defense isn't a new mechanism. It's the discipline of asking one question whenever the word “fit” appears in a sentence with confidence attached to it: what would this claim have

looked like if it had failed? If nobody in the room can answer that, the word "fit" is not describing a finding. It's describing a mood.

The Limitation, Stated Plainly

This paper cannot immunize the vocabulary against its own success. The more useful "fit for purpose" becomes as a phrase, the more valuable it becomes to borrow without earning, and no amount of definitional precision written here will follow the word into the room where it gets misused. That is not a flaw unique to AFS, it is the standard fate of any diagnostic language good enough to sound authoritative on its own. The honest position is not that Fitness-Washing can be prevented. It's that it can be named, which is the only thing that makes it recognizable the next time someone reaches for the word instead of the work.

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