

What's Actually New Here

An Originality Audit of the Adaptive Fitness System — The Remix Problem

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I have spent a long time telling people their organizations need to be more adaptive. I have spent almost as long wondering whether anything I told them was actually new. These are related concerns.

The ingredients in the Adaptive Fitness System are not hard to trace. Lean has been around long enough to have grandchildren. Theory of Constraints has a book written in novel form, which tells you something about how much the field needed new entry points. Real Options was borrowed from finance by people who thought options thinking might apply to uncertain decisions, which it does. Agile has been a certification industry for fifteen years. Flow is from Goldratt, and before him, from physics.

A skeptic looking at the AFS ingredient list would produce something like a music critic reviewing a tribute band. Competent. Perhaps even good. But not new.

The problem with the skeptic's review is that it measures novelty at the wrong level. Originality in a conceptual system does not live in the components. It lives in the architecture, in what the system does with the components, how it connects them, and what it refuses to become.

That is what this paper examines.

The Ingredient List

Let us be precise about the borrowing, because intellectual honesty is what the AFS claims to offer practitioners. It should start at home.

The AFS draws on Lean manufacturing principles: waste reduction, flow optimization, pull systems. It draws on the Theory of Constraints, the idea that a system's output is limited by its most constrained resource, and that the work is to find and elevate that constraint. It draws on Real Options thinking, treating decisions as options to be kept open rather than commitments to be made early. It draws on Flow theory, Goldratt's work on throughput and the physics of work moving through systems.

At the execution layer, it incorporates Agile's iterative cadence logic. At the strategic layer, it borrows portfolio management concepts from project finance. The fitness metaphor itself, organizational health assessed across multiple dimensions, appears in various forms in the management literature going back at least to the 1990s.

None of this is concealed. The AFS has never claimed to have invented Lean, or discovered constraints, or coined the word agile. The claim was always something different: that these things, assembled in a particular way, with a particular diagnostic logic, do something that assembling them differently does not do.

That claim is what requires examination.

Five Places Where the AFS Breaks Convention

1. Fitness as the Organizing Logic, Not Maturity

Almost every organizational diagnostic approach published in the last thirty years is implicitly a maturity model. You are at Level 2. The goal is Level 4. Here is the path.

Maturity models are appealing because they are legible. They produce a number, a position, a gap to close. They tell a reassuring story: you are somewhere on a journey, and the journey has a destination.

The AFS organizes around fitness instead. Fitness is context-dependent by definition. A marathon runner is not fitter than a powerlifter, they are fit for different demands. The diagnostic question is not "how mature is this organization?" It is "fit for what?"

This is a small linguistic shift with large structural consequences. It means there is no universal destination. It means the diagnostic output is always relative to the organization's operating context, not to an abstract ideal. It means the practitioner's first job is to understand the demand environment before offering any assessment of the supply of capability.

Most maturity models skip that step. The AFS makes it the whole first move.

2. The Approach/Framework Distinction as Load-Bearing Epistemology

The AFS draws a sharp distinction between approaches and frameworks, and insists on it in ways that look like pedantry until you understand what the distinction is carrying.

A framework is designed to be followed. Its value proposition is replicability, a practitioner at any competence level can apply it and get a result that resembles what other practitioners get. SAFe is a framework. Scrum is a framework. This is not a criticism. Replicability is a legitimate design goal.

An approach is different. An approach encodes a way of seeing and a set of diagnostic principles. It requires the practitioner to exercise judgment that the approach itself cannot replace. The AFS is explicit that its diagnostic logic, the Adaptive Signal Field, the Four Questions for Fitness, the Friction-Fitness Map, cannot be mechanically applied. These require a practitioner who can read context, tolerate ambiguity, and resist the pull of pre-packaged answers.

This distinction matters because it determines what kind of failure mode the system has. Approaches fail when the practitioner lacks the judgment to use them, and the failure looks like analytical paralysis or idiosyncratic conclusions. Frameworks fail when they are applied to contexts they were not designed for, and the failure looks like compliance without results.

Naming that distinction clearly, and making it structural rather than rhetorical, is not common. Most consulting IP obscures the judgment requirement because judgment is hard to teach and harder to sell. The AFS puts it in the foreground.

3. Reverse Validation as Directional Inversion

Standard validation logic moves forward. You form a hypothesis, design an experiment, run the experiment, and check whether the results confirm the hypothesis. This is the scientific method, and it is a good method.

Reverse Validation moves backward. It starts from outcomes already in evidence, things that are working, or not working, and asks what they reveal about the assumptions that produced them. The diagnostic direction is inverted: from evidence to assumptions, not from assumptions to evidence.

This is not simply a matter of preference. The forward direction assumes you have the luxury of designing experiments before committing to a direction. Many organizational contexts do not offer that luxury. Decisions have already been made. Systems are already running. Investments are already deployed. The question is not what to test, it is what the existing evidence is already telling you, and whether anyone is reading it.

Reverse Validation is a diagnostic tool designed for organizations that are already in motion, not organizations preparing to move. That design constraint is different from what most validation approaches assume.

4. The Stress-Test as Structural Self-Examination

The AFS Stress-Test white paper does something unusual: it catalogs the AFS's own failure modes.

It identifies where the diagnostic logic breaks down, where the fitness metaphor misleads, where the approach/framework distinction creates its own kind of rigidity, where the practitioner judgment requirement becomes a liability rather than an asset. It does not resolve these tensions. It names them, frames them, and offers partial reframes that acknowledge the residual risk.

This is not common. Consulting IP is usually self-promotional by design, because the audience is prospective buyers of a service. Naming your own failure modes is commercially counterintuitive. It tells the prospective client what not to buy you for.

The structural decision to include a stress-test as a canonical document, not an addendum, not a private caveat, but a published piece that sits alongside the core diagnostic materials, signals something about what kind of system the AFS is trying to be. It is trying to be an honest one. Whether it succeeds is a question practitioners must answer in their own contexts. The attempt itself is the unusual part.

5. Fitness-Driven Design as Pre-Methodology Design Logic

Most discussions of organizational design begin with the question of what approach to adopt. Agile or waterfall? SAFe or LeSS? Centralized or decentralized? The debate is between options.

Fitness-Driven Design steps back from that debate. It asks: before you choose an approach, what design principles should govern the choice itself? It operates at the level of design logic — the thinking that happens before methodology selection, not during it.

F-DD's three principles: design for constraint rather than optimization; build for reversibility; honor the fitness context, are not prescriptions for any particular approach. They are criteria for evaluating which approach is appropriate for a given context. They are pre-methodology.

This positioning is architecturally uncommon. Most design guidance collapses into methodology advocacy. F-DD refuses to do that. It treats methodology selection as a downstream consequence of design thinking, not the design thinking itself.

The Refusal as the Most Original Move

If pressed to identify the single most unconventional feature of the AFS, it is not any of the five things listed above. It is the systemic refusal to become something that would be easier to sell.

Consulting IP trends toward codification. Codification enables training programs, certification tracks, licensed implementations, and partner networks. It enables scale. The commercial logic is strong.

The AFS resists this at every structural level. The approach/framework distinction makes it resistant to certification, you cannot certify practitioner judgment in a weekend course. The stress-test makes it resistant to advocacy, it says, explicitly, here is where this breaks. The fitness logic makes it resistant to universal prescription, there is no version of this that applies to every organization without contextual adaptation. The pre-methodology positioning of Fitness-Driven Design makes it resistant to adoption as just another method in the toolkit.

These are not accidental features. They are the consequences of a design choice: to prioritize diagnostic integrity over commercial replicability.

That choice is, in itself, a form of originality. It is not the kind that gets cited in academic papers. But in a field crowded with IP that looks increasingly alike precisely because each piece was optimized for the same commercial pressures, the decision to not optimize is notable.

It is also, it should be said, a harder way to run a consulting practice.

What This Means for Practitioners

The originality audit matters for practitioners for a reason that has nothing to do with the AFS specifically.

Every consulting approach you encounter will claim to be new. The claim is usually made at the component level, new vocabulary, new diagrams, new certification tiers. The audit question is whether anything new is happening at the architectural level: in the logic that connects the components, in the epistemological commitments that shape what the system can and cannot do, in the failure modes the system acknowledges versus the ones it conceals.

The AFS's architecture is, in this audit, genuinely distinguishable from adjacent approaches, not because the ingredients are novel, but because the organizing logic is different, the epistemological commitments are explicit, and the failure modes are named rather than hidden.

Practitioners who internalize that audit question will find it useful well beyond the AFS. It is a diagnostic tool for evaluating any approach, including this one.

Honest Limitations

This audit has limits worth naming.

Originality is partly positional. A practitioner already fluent in Cynefin, or Stafford Beer's Viable System Model, or in various organizational typology approaches, will find different things novel in the AFS than a practitioner arriving from a background in traditional project management. The audit cannot fully control for that variation. It reflects a particular vantage point, practitioner-facing, context-sensitive, diagnostics-oriented, and readers from other vantage points will score the results differently.

There is also the problem of parallel discovery. The AFS was developed across two decades of field practice, not from literature review. It is entirely possible that other practitioners, working independently, developed similar architectural principles without publishing them in ways that entered the mainstream literature. The absence of a prior citation is not proof of novelty. It is proof of absence, a weaker claim.

And there is the question of what novelty is worth, which this paper does not resolve. A practitioner who gets good diagnostic results using established approaches with well-

understood components may have no use for architectural originality at all. Fit for purpose is the first principle. Original is not the same as better.

Bridge

This paper sits alongside the AFS Stress-Test as a companion in a particular genre: the honest self-examination.

The Stress-Test asked where the AFS breaks. This audit asks where it is actually new. Both questions resist the promotional register that most consulting IP defaults to. Both treat the reader as someone capable of evaluating an argument rather than receiving a pitch.

That is, in the end, what the approach/framework distinction is pointing at. A framework delivers a result. An approach develops a reader. The AFS's originality claim, if it has one, is less about the components it contains than about the kind of practitioner it tries to produce.

Whether it succeeds at that is something only practitioners can assess. This paper is not the verdict. It is the evidence the jury should weigh.

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