

Stress-Testing the Adaptive Fitness System

A Critical Examination of What the AFS Gets Wrong — and Why It Still Works

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This paper subjects the Adaptive Fitness System (AFS) to a deliberate and unsentimental critique. The AFS — built around four fitness dimensions (fit for purpose, context, execution, and improvement) and operationalised through the Adaptive Signal Field diagnostic — is examined not to celebrate it but to determine whether it holds under pressure.

The argument is structured in four movements: first, the AFS is stripped down to its irreducible claims; second, six genuine weaknesses are identified and examined without apology; third, those weaknesses are reframed through the lens of what they reveal about the approach's actual design intent; and fourth, the paper concludes with a precise account of where the AFS earns its keep and where it does not.

The conclusion is not that AFS is without flaw. It is that its weaknesses are often features misread as bugs — provided the practitioner understands what kind of tool it actually is.

1. What the AFS Actually Claims

Before an approach can be fairly criticised, it must be fairly represented. This section strips the AFS down to its irreducible propositions — removing the surrounding explanation, the practitioner language, and the contextual caveats — to expose what the approach is genuinely asserting.

The AFS makes four core claims: Agile practices fail not because agile is wrong in principle, but because the conditions for it are unfit. Fitness can be assessed across four distinct but interdependent dimensions: purpose, context, execution, and improvement. These dimensions serve as a recurring diagnostic lens — not a one-time assessment, but a continuous sense-making instrument. The output of that diagnostic is not a prescription but a map of tensions that makes dysfunction visible and discussable.

That is the skeleton. Everything else in the AFS — the Adaptive Signal Field, the Four Questions for Fitness, the Friction-Fitness Map, and the four-level architecture that carries a fitness reading from diagnosis through to design, development, and ecosystem operation — is operationalisation of those four propositions.

Note what the AFS does not claim: it does not claim to tell practitioners what to do next. It does not claim to be a maturity model. It does not claim to be scientifically validated. It does not claim universal applicability. These are not oversights. They are decisions.

Criticism of the AFS that targets these non-claims — that it does not tell you what to do, or that it has not been empirically proven — is criticism of the wrong target. What follows is criticism of the right ones.

2. The Genuine Weaknesses

The following six criticisms are offered without hedging. Each one represents a real limitation — not a straw man, not a misreading. Practitioners who deploy the AFS in high-stakes environments should understand these weaknesses before they proceed.

2.1 The Four Dimensions Lack Operational Precision

The AFS organises fitness into four dimensions: purpose, context, execution, and improvement. None of these are defined with enough precision to make independent assessment reliable.

What, precisely, constitutes 'fit for purpose'? Does it mean the right business outcome is being targeted? That the team understands the customer need? That the initiative is properly scoped? All of these are plausible interpretations, and different practitioners will reach different conclusions from the same situation.

This is not a minor technical flaw. Diagnostic approaches derive their value from shared calibration. When two coaches assess the same team using the Adaptive Signal Field diagnostic and arrive at scores that differ by two full points on the same dimension, the tool has not produced a shared reality. It has produced two subjective impressions with a number attached.

THE CORE RISK: Organisations that believe they are assessing fitness may be doing nothing more than arithmetising pre-existing opinions. The number gives an illusion of rigour. The rigour is not there.

2.2 Fitness Cannot Be Measured Independently of the Observer

The AFS has no external reference point. Fitness is assessed by the people operating inside the system being assessed. This is analogous to asking patients to diagnose their own illness and then treating the diagnosis as clinical data.

The Adaptive Signal Field reading is explicitly a facilitated group conversation. The output depends entirely on who is in the room, what they feel safe saying, and how the facilitator frames the discussion. In psychologically unsafe environments — which are, notably, the environments where fitness assessment is most needed — the diagnostic will produce flattering scores that reflect the power gradient in the room, not the actual state of the system.

There is no independent indicator, no behavioural anchor, no observable proxy that allows an AFS assessment to be validated against something outside the assessment itself. This is a structural vulnerability.

2.3 The Framework Provides No Path Forward

The AFS identifies fitness gaps. It does not tell you how to close them. This is defended as intentional — context-sensitivity means no universal prescription applies. That defence is coherent in theory and insufficient in practice.

Practitioners working inside organisations with limited adaptive capacity, constrained budgets, risk-averse governance, and entrenched cultures do not need an approach that identifies problems with moderate sophistication. They need direction. They need sequencing. They need

to know which gap to close first and why, and what an adjacent possible improvement looks like.

The AFS, at its current level of development, stops precisely at the point where practitioners need it most to continue. It produces a well-framed problem statement. It does not offer even a heuristic for what comes next.

THE CONSULTANT'S TRAP: An approach that surfaces problems without providing paths forward is useful for consultants billing by the hour. It is significantly less useful for the internal change agent who must justify recommendations to a CFO by Friday afternoon.

2.4 The Fitness Metaphor Can Actively Mislead

The word 'fitness' is doing significant rhetorical work in this approach. It implies dynamism, ongoing effort, and organic development. These are real and useful connotations. But the metaphor carries traps.

In physical fitness, there are objective measurements: weight, resting heart rate, VO2 max, completion of a defined distance in a defined time. Progress is falsifiable. You either ran the 5km in under 25 minutes or you did not. The AFS borrows the aesthetic of fitness — the language of health, vitality, and conditioning — while discarding the falsifiability that makes physical fitness assessment meaningful.

More dangerously, fitness implies a target state. A person aims to be fit enough to run a marathon or lift a defined weight. What is the AFS equivalent? What does fully fit agility look like? The approach does not say — which is arguably honest, but which deprives the metaphor of its most useful property: a direction of travel that everyone can agree on before the work begins.

2.5 The Framework Is Vulnerable to Sophisticated Gaming

Experienced agile practitioners — and experienced organisational politicians — will learn the AFS vocabulary quickly. Once learned, it can be used to manage the diagnostic rather than respond to it.

A senior leader who understands that low 'fit for improvement' scores imply structural dysfunction will ensure that enough retrospective activity is visible to push the score upward. A team under pressure will rate itself higher on 'fit for execution' because acknowledging inadequate capability feels threatening. An organisation undergoing transformation will score 'fit for purpose' highly because admitting strategic incoherence in front of the transformation lead is politically untenable.

The AFS has no mechanism to distinguish genuine fitness from performed fitness. It relies on honest self-reporting. In competitive, politically charged organisational contexts, honest self-reporting is not the default behaviour. It is the exception.

2.6 The Framework Is Not Falsifiable

This is the sharpest criticism and deserves to be stated plainly: the AFS cannot be proven wrong.

If an organisation uses the AFS, identifies fitness gaps, works on them, and improves — the approach claims credit. If the organisation uses the AFS, identifies fitness gaps, works on them, and does not improve — the approach can argue that the gaps were not correctly identified, or that context shifted, or that the improvement work was poorly executed. There is no outcome the AFS predicts that, if it does not occur, would lead a reasonable practitioner to conclude the approach is flawed.

This is not a trivial problem. Approaches that cannot be falsified cannot be validated. They can accumulate anecdotal support indefinitely without ever being tested. The AFS belongs to a long tradition of consulting approaches — the BCG Matrix, the McKinsey 7S, Kotter's 8-Step Model — that are useful heuristics but not empirical theories. That is a legitimate category of tool. Practitioners should be clear about which category they are in.

An approach that cannot be proven wrong can also never be definitively proven right. That is the price of adaptability.

3. The Reframe — Why the Weaknesses Survive Scrutiny

Having exposed the weaknesses without apology, a sense-making paper is obligated to ask whether those weaknesses are fatal or whether they are features misread through the wrong lens.

The answer depends on a prior question that most AFS critics skip: what kind of tool is this supposed to be?

The AFS is not a measurement instrument. It is not a maturity model. It is not a prescriptive methodology. It is a sense-making lens — specifically, a structured conversation technology designed to make organisational dysfunction visible and discussable in environments where those conversations are normally suppressed.

Evaluated against that purpose, each weakness looks different.

On Operational Precision: the lack of precise operational definitions is a weakness if you need consistent measurement across contexts. It is a feature if you understand that the act of defining what 'fit for purpose' means in this specific context, with this specific team, is itself a diagnostic act. The conversation that produces a shared definition is more valuable than any pre-supplied definition could be.

Organisations that cannot agree on what 'fit for purpose' means are already demonstrating a fitness gap. The ambiguity of the approach surfaces that gap in a way that a precisely defined assessment instrument would bypass entirely.

On Observer Dependence: the AFS does not pretend to produce objective scores. The Adaptive Signal Field is explicitly a facilitated conversation, not a measurement instrument. The gap between what individuals score privately and what gets surfaced collectively is not noise — it is signal. Specifically, it signals the degree of psychological safety and the presence or absence of shared mental models.

An assessment instrument that requires safety to work honestly is well-matched to an objective that requires safety to achieve. The AFS is less a thermometer and more a fever: its reception by the organisation tells you as much as its content.

On the Absence of Prescription: the AFS intentionally avoids prescription because prescription is what produces agile theatre. When an approach tells organisations what to do next, organisations do those things regardless of whether they are appropriate. They implement the practices without the thinking. They tick the boxes without developing the capacity.

The AFS forces the question: given what we now understand about our specific fitness gaps, what makes sense here? That question is harder. It is also the only question that produces durable adaptive capacity rather than temporary compliance.

This does not mean the absence of prescription is costless. It means the cost is worth paying if the alternative is yet another transformation that produces ceremonies without value flow.

THE KEY DISTINCTION: There is a difference between an approach that has no prescription because its author had nothing useful to say, and an approach that withholds prescription because prescription would undermine the objective. The AFS belongs to the second category. That does not make it complete. It makes it honest about what it is for.

On Falsifiability: the criticism that the AFS is not falsifiable is correct as a statement about scientific epistemology and irrelevant as a criticism of a sense-making tool. Applying Popperian falsifiability criteria to a facilitated conversation approach is a category error. No one should critique a map for not being the territory.

The relevant question is not whether this approach can be proven wrong. The relevant question is whether using it produces better organisational conversations than not using it. That is an empirical question practitioners can answer from their own experience.

Consistently, organisations that engage with the Adaptive Signal Field report that it surfaces tensions that were present but undiscussable prior to the assessment. Whether that is attributable to the specific four dimensions of the AFS or simply to the act of structured reflection is an open and legitimate research question. It is not a reason to dismiss the tool.

4. Where the AFS Earns Its Keep — and Where It Does Not

Having established both the genuine weaknesses and their reframes, the paper concludes with a precise account of fit: the conditions under which the AFS is the right tool, and the conditions under which it is the wrong one.

4.1 Where the AFS Performs Well

In environments where the transformation conversation has stalled and parties cannot agree on what the problem actually is. The AFS creates a shared vocabulary and structured mechanism for surfacing disagreement productively. In organisations where multiple change initiatives run in parallel without coherent sense of why agility is being pursued, the 'fit for purpose' dimension alone provides enough diagnostic value to justify the conversation. With experienced coaches who understand that the score is not the output — the conversation is:

practitioners who treat the diagnostic as a rating system will get rating-system results, while practitioners who treat it as a thinking partner will get thinking-partner results. As a recurring instrument rather than a one-time assessment, applied quarterly or at the start of each significant initiative cycle, where the delta between readings reveals directional movement. And in post-transformation reviews, where organisations want to understand not just whether they delivered outputs but whether they developed genuine adaptive capacity.

4.2 Where the AFS Performs Poorly

In politically toxic environments where the diagnostic will be captured by power rather than used to surface truth — the reading produces politically acceptable scores, not accurate ones. As a replacement for capability development: knowing you are 'unfit for execution' is not the same as knowing how to build execution fitness, and organisations that use AFS without any accompanying development pathway produce well-labelled problems with no solutions. With inexperienced practitioners who conflate the approach with the thinking — the AFS requires a practitioner who can hold the dimensions lightly, adapt facilitation to the room, and know when to push on a reading and when to let it pass; it is not a self-service tool. In environments that require external validation or board-level reporting, since the AFS does not produce the kind of evidence that satisfies governance requirements or investor inquiries. And as a substitute for structural diagnosis — organisations with deep systemic dysfunction, misaligned incentives, dysfunctional governance, legacy technical debt constraining flow, need structural diagnosis, not a fitness conversation.

5. Conclusion — An Honest Verdict

The Adaptive Fitness System is not a rigorous measurement approach. It is not a prescriptive methodology. It is not a scientifically validated theory of organisational change. Practitioners who approach it expecting any of those things will be disappointed, and appropriately so.

What the AFS is, is a well-constructed sense-making lens with a focused and honest scope: to make fitness gaps visible and discussable in environments where the agile industrial complex has trained organisations to perform compliance rather than develop genuine capacity.

Its four dimensions — purpose, context, execution, improvement — are not operationally precise, and that imprecision is sometimes a feature. Its diagnostic instrument is observer-dependent, and that dependency is informative. Its silence on prescription is not negligence but restraint, grounded in a coherent theory of what kills adaptive capacity.

The genuine weaknesses are real. The absence of falsifiability is a category problem the approach should be more transparent about. The risk of gaming in unsafe environments is underaddressed. The absence of an adjacent prescriptive layer leaves practitioners exposed at the point where they need support most.

These criticisms should sharpen the approach, not discard it. A stress-tested AFS that acknowledges its boundaries is more useful than an uncritical AFS that overclaims.

The value of a sense-making tool is not that it gives you answers. It is that it makes the right questions unavoidable.

On that criterion, the AFS holds.

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