

The Canon Problem

Why calling the AFS an 'approach' is not modesty, it's load-bearing

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There is a moment in the life of every framework when it stops being a tool and starts being a thing people defend. You can usually spot it: the language shifts from 'this helped us' to 'you're not doing it right.' The framework has become canonical. And once something is canonical, it no longer needs to work. It just needs to be followed.

This is not an abstract concern. I've watched it happen to Scrum. I've watched it happen to SAFe. I've watched it happen to ideas I had a hand in shaping. The pattern is consistent: useful heuristic becomes codified method becomes certification becomes orthodoxy. Each step adds institutional weight and removes adaptive capacity.

So when the Adaptive Fitness System gets asked, as it increasingly does, whether it is a framework, the answer matters. Not for branding reasons. Because the answer determines whether the AFS can do what it claims to do.

What 'Framework' Actually Implies

A framework makes a specific epistemic promise: that its categories are complete, its sequence is correct, and its application is transferable. Frameworks work by reducing the degrees of freedom available to the practitioner. That is not a flaw, it is the feature. A junior team following a framework will produce more consistent output than the same team operating without one. Consistency is valuable. Especially early.

But frameworks carry a hidden cost: they encode the assumptions of their origin context. Scrum encodes the assumptions of a small software team in the 1990s. SAFe encodes the assumptions of large-scale US enterprise transformation as it was understood in the 2010s. These assumptions are not wrong, they were reasonable responses to real conditions. The problem is that frameworks don't announce their assumptions. They present them as universal structure.

An approach is different. An approach offers orientation without prescription. It says: here is how to think about the problem, not here is the sequence of steps. The distinction is not semantic. It determines whether the user needs to understand the underlying logic or just follow the instructions.

What the AFS Is Actually Doing

The AFS is built around a core diagnostic question: is the organization fit — fit for purpose, fit for context, fit for execution, fit for improvement? That question doesn't have a universal answer. It has a contextually-specific one, which means the practitioner has to understand the organization in front of them, not match it to a template.

The Adaptive Signal Field doesn't tell you where an organization should be, or prescribe a direction. It gives you a way to see where it is, surfaces the tension between stability and adaptability, and reveals whether there is a gap between that and where it needs to be, so the organization can navigate it consciously. The Friction-Fitness Map doesn't validate a predetermined answer. It tests whether the current approach is actually producing the results the organization claims to want.

This is not framework logic. This is diagnostic logic. And the difference matters: a framework tells you what to do. A diagnostic tells you what to look at.

The *Sense* → *Interpret* → *Decide* → *Act* loop at the centre of the AFS reinforces this. The critical word is Interpret. Sensing is passive, data arrives. Deciding and acting are outputs. But interpreting requires judgment. It requires someone who understands the context, holds the organizational history, and can distinguish signal from noise. A framework can standardize sensing. It cannot standardize interpretation. The AFS doesn't try.

The Canonization Risk

Here is where it gets uncomfortable. The AFS is now a published series. It has named components. It has a logical architecture that spans multiple posts and a reference document. Practitioners are beginning to use its language. All of which means it is accumulating exactly the infrastructure through which approaches become frameworks.

This is not a theoretical risk. It is the normal trajectory of any body of thought that gains traction. The question is whether the design of the AFS contains sufficient resistance to that trajectory, or whether it will eventually be indistinguishable from the thing it was built to replace.

Three structural features are load-bearing here. First, the AFS is explicitly self-critical, the stress-test white paper is part of the corpus, not separate from it. An approach that publicly documents its own failure modes is harder to use as a blunt instrument than one that presents only its strengths. Second, the AFS is positioned as a sense-making tool, not a delivery methodology. It is harder to certify a way of thinking than a sequence of steps. Third, the terminology is diagnostic rather than prescriptive, 'fitness' is a question, not a standard.

These features help. They do not guarantee anything.

The Practitioner's Responsibility

The honest version of this is that no design choice made at the authoring stage can prevent misuse at the application stage. If a practitioner wants to turn the diagnostic into a checklist, they will. If a consulting firm wants to certify AFS practitioners and create a priesthood, they can try. The approach cannot defend itself against those decisions.

What it can do is make those decisions visible as a departure from intent. The difference between a framework and an approach is not just structural, it is relational. A framework says: follow this. An approach says: think with this. The practitioner who uses the AFS as a framework is not using it wrong in a technical sense. They are using it in a way that abandons its central claim, which is that organizational fitness is always contextually determined.

This is the responsibility that comes with diagnostic tools: they require interpretation at every stage. The Friction-Fitness Map doesn't validate itself. The Adaptive Signal Field doesn't orient itself. The practitioner has to bring judgment. If the practitioner is not willing or able to do that, the AFS will not compensate for the absence. A hammer used without judgment produces bruised thumbs. A diagnostic used without judgment produces confident misdiagnoses.

A Note on Credibility

There is a legitimate tension here that deserves naming. The 'approach not framework' framing carries a risk of false modesty, a way of avoiding accountability by never being specific enough to be wrong. Approaches can be unfalsifiable. Frameworks, for all their rigidity, at least make claims precise enough to test.

The AFS attempts to navigate this by being specific at the diagnostic level without being prescriptive at the intervention level. The Four Questions for Fitness produce specific answers in specific contexts. The Adaptive Signal Field produces a specific reading for a specific organization at a specific moment. The outputs are concrete even when the method is flexible. That is the intended balance: rigorous enough to be useful, flexible enough to remain honest.

Whether that balance holds in practice is not something the author can determine from the writing. It is something practitioners determine in application. Which is, itself, the point.

Bridge

The canon problem doesn't have a clean resolution. Any body of work that is useful enough to spread will accumulate institutional weight. The question is whether that weight compresses the adaptive space the work was designed to protect, or whether it can be carried without that compression.

The AFS was designed to help organizations ask better questions under conditions of genuine uncertainty. If it becomes canonical, if its language becomes something people recite rather

than something they use to think, it will have failed at the thing it was built for. Not with a bang. With the quiet sound of a checklist being ticked.

That is the risk worth watching. And the reason the distinction between approach and framework is not modesty. It is load-bearing.

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