The HFML Standard

Human-First Mechanical Leadership: A Governance Framework

Version	1.3
Status	Public Operational Draft (Stable Release)
Authored by	Dennis Knight / LeadershipPlaybooks.com
Date	1 January 2026
Document	Governance Framework Standard

Note: This standard is designed for documentation, internal wikis, and PDF export. It is intended to be adopted and iterated using the versioning rule in Section 1.4.

Table of Contents

In Pages: Insert a Table of Contents using the document headings (Insert -> Table of Contents).

1. Philosophy and Scope

1.1 Core Philosophy

Organisational reliability must be engineered (Mechanical), specifically to preserve creative capacity (Human).

> **Definition:** Mechanical = Reliable by design, not cold. It means outcomes are protected by defaults, constraints, and automation rather than human heroics.

1.2 Primary Goal

To decouple organisational output from human stamina.

1.3 Scope of Application

This standard applies to recurring work, handoffs, operational processes, and decision loops. It does not replace strategy, product vision, or domain expertise. It is the operating system that prevents execution from collapsing under load.

1.4 Versioning Rule

This standard adheres to semantic versioning principles:

- v1.x: Compatible improvements and clarifications.
- v2.0: Structural changes or major deprecations.

2. Compliance Levels (RFC 2119 Style)

To ensure the standard is adoptable but rigorous, HFML defines requirements as follows:

- **MUST:** The 5 Principles, The Lifecycle (Phases 1 to 4), The Deletion Rule, Weekly Triage. (Non-negotiable).
- **SHOULD:** Metric targets (for example, Bus Factor >= 3), The Drag Index. (Recommended, but vary by context).
- **MAY:** Specific tooling choices, variations on scoring methods. (Discretionary).

3. The 5 Immutable Principles (Axioms)

These principles are MUST-haves. Any process violating these is non-compliant with HFML.

- **Conservation of Human Energy**

  Human cognitive load is a finite resource. Repetitive, low-variance work must be mechanised or removed. Human effort is reserved exclusively for creative, high-variance, judgment-heavy, or empathetic work.

- **Mechanisms Over Motivation**

Reliability is created through Rails (systems, constraints, defaults), not through speeches, reminders, or "trying harder."

- **Failure Is an Input**

  Errors, missed deadlines, churn, and burnout are treated as data signals indicating a missing or broken mechanism, not personal weakness.

- **The Bus Standard (Resilience by Design)**

  No critical outcome may depend on the unique memory or presence of a specific individual. Critical knowledge must be encoded into the system.

- **Service to the Human**

  Mechanisms exist to serve the operator. Any mechanism that adds drag without protecting time, reducing errors, or improving clarity must be redesigned or removed.

4. Core Definitions

4.1 The Rail (Control Object)

HFML replaces "Policy" with "Rails."

- **Policy:** "Please remember to fill in the CRM." (Relies on memory/willpower; high failure rate).
- **Rail:** A mandatory field, automation, or workflow gate that prevents closure until data exists. (Relies on system behaviour; system-enforced / fail-safe).

4.2 Bus Factor (Resilience Metric)

A scored indicator (1 to 10) measuring vulnerability to losing a key human.

- 1: Oral tradition; total fragility. (If they leave, the capability dies).
- 5: Documented, but may be outdated or ignored.
- 10: Mechanised, monitored, and recoverable. (Humans supervise; the system runs).

4.3 Drag (The Enemy)

The measurement of friction that consumes energy without creating value.

- Mechanical Drag: Slow tools, poor meeting design, broken handoffs.
- Cognitive Drag: Unclear priorities, political ambiguity, fear, role confusion.

5. The HFML Lifecycle ("The Engine")

The continuous loop designed to identify and remove organisational drag.

Phase 1: Signal Detection (Triage)

- **Objective:** Identify where energy is bleeding out.
- **Trigger:** Recurring error, repeated question, or visible stress.

- **The "Mars Diagnostic":** If a key team member was dropped on Mars today, what process would immediately break?
- **Mandatory Artifact:** The Drag Audit.

Phase 2: Mechanism Architecture (Design)

- **Objective:** Design a Rail that absorbs the load.
- **Constraint:** Default Alive. The rail must work even when people are busy or distracted. If it relies on memory, it is not a rail.
- **Mandatory Artifact:** Rail Specification.

Phase 3: Human Integration (Deploy)

- **Objective:** Ensure the mechanism protects humans rather than polices them.
- **Human-First Check:** If the team experiences the mechanism as surveillance, integration has failed.
- **Mandatory Artifact:** The Playbook (must include: "Why this exists" and "How to use it in 60 seconds").

Phase 4: Calibration (Review)

- **Objective:** Prevent process rot.
- **The Deletion Rule:** If a rail is consistently ignored, it must be removed or rebuilt. Zombie processes are prohibited.
- **Mandatory Artifact:** Decay Report.

6. Controls and Metrics (KPIs)

Verifiable data points to ensure the standard is functioning.

6.1 The Vital Signs (Quantitative)

Metric	Target	Definition / Measurement
Bus Factor Score	>= 3 (Critical Paths)	Count of people capable of executing end-to-end without help. "Capable" includes access, permissions, runbooks, and context.
Rework Rate	< 5%	% of tickets/tasks reopened or returned to backlog within 14 days.
Meeting Load	< 15% Capacity	Calculated against contracted hours or sprint capacity (approx < 6 hours/week).
Interrupt Frequency	0 (Deep Work)	Count of unscheduled pings that require response during protected deep work blocks.

6.2 The Drag Index (Qualitative)

Quarterly pulse survey (scale 1 to 5).

- **Clarity:** "I know exactly what 'good' looks like."
- **Safety:** "I can fix a broken process without permission."
- **Focus:** "I spend energy on problems, not bureaucracy."
- **Threshold:** If average is < 3.0, a Drag Audit is mandatory.

7. Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibility	Ownership
The Architect (Leader)	Designs the ecosystem. Does not manage via presence.	Owns the Rails and Reliability.
The Operator (Team)	Executes high-value work. Provides feedback signals.	Owns the Output and Truth.
The Mechanic (Ops/Coach)	Maintains the machine. Spots drag and prevents decay.	Owns documentation and maintenance.

8. The Operating Model (Cadence)

8.1 Weekly Triage (15 minutes)

Agenda:

- What broke? What did we repeat?

Output:

- Add one item to the Mechanism Backlog (for example, "Automate the Tuesday report").

8.2 Monthly Decay Review (60 minutes)

Agenda:

- Zombie Check: Delete unused rails.
- Bus Factor Check: Identify new single points of failure.

Output:

- Updated Decay Report.

8.3 Quarterly Architecture Audit

Agenda:

- Review Drag Index scores and major refactors.

Output:

- Strategic roadmap for system improvements.

Appendix A: Example Rail Specification

The standard in practice.

Name: The Central Intake Rail

Goal: Prevent context switching and "shiny object" drift.

- **Trigger (Input):** Any request for work (Slack DM, Email, Idea, Bug, or "Brain at 2am").
- **The Mechanism (Rail):** All inputs must be routed to a unified inbox or board. Direct DMs for work are auto-replied with a link to the form.
- **Default Alive Behaviour:** If the Architect is asleep, the request sits in the queue safely. It does not get lost in chat history.
- **The Playbook:** "If it's not in the Inbox, it doesn't exist. We triage every Monday at 10am. Do not DM requests."
- **Metric:** Count of "rogue tasks" done outside the system per week (target < 2).