

The Living Systems Framework Guide

A Complete Guide to Organic Organizational Development

Purpose of This Guide

The Living Systems Framework (LSF) is a lightweight framework that helps organizations develop sustainably through natural patterns rather than forced processes. This guide contains the definition of LSF, its components, rules, and guidance for implementation.

Definition of Living Systems Framework

Living Systems Framework is a framework within which organizations can address complex adaptive challenges while sustainably creating value through organic development patterns.

LSF is:

- ***Lightweight:*** Simple to understand, transformative as it deepens
- ***Organic:*** Based on natural growth and completion cycles
- ***Empirical:*** Progress is made visible through system health indicators
- ***Iterative:*** Development happens in natural cycles

Living Systems Theory

LSF is founded on empiricism and organic systems thinking. Knowledge comes from experience and making decisions based on what is observed. Organizations are living entities with natural patterns of growth, seasonal cycles, and rhythmic adaptation - like trees that grow through seasons, tides that ebb and flow, and ecosystems that pulse with life.

*LSF uses iterative, cyclical approaches that honor natural rhythms for sustainable growth and adaptation through **Life Points** - moments when work naturally reaches completion, like fruit ripening or flowers blooming.*

Three pillars support every LSF implementation:

1. ***Transparency:*** Current system state and progress are visible, like clear water revealing the ecosystem beneath
2. ***Inspection:*** System health is regularly observed, like a gardener monitoring plant vitality and growth patterns
3. ***Adaptation:*** When observation reveals imbalance, adjustments flow naturally, like a river finding its course around obstacles

Values

LSF values organic emergence and natural completion, ecosystem health and systemic vitality, natural rhythms and cyclical growth, sustainable development and regenerative practices. We honor the wisdom of seasons - knowing when to plant, when to tend, when to harvest, and when to rest. Like a forest that thrives through diverse interconnected relationships, we value systemic vitality and living productivity.

Central to LSF is trust in people - like a skilled gardener who provides optimal conditions and then trusts the plant to grow naturally. When employees (leaves) receive proper light, water, and nutrients, they naturally perform their vital transformation work beautifully. LSF creates supportive structures and then trusts the living system to flourish.

The Living Organization Model

Organizations are viewed as living trees with interconnected components:

- **Root System:** Cultural foundations, core values, historical knowledge, resource networks
- **Stem (Leadership):** Supports and nourishes the organization, channels resources, maintains stability
- **Branches (Teams/Departments):** Extend organizational reach, support growth, distribute resources to leaves
- **Leaves (Employees):** The vital life force conducting continuous transformation work, converting inputs into organizational energy through daily efforts - each requiring proper light, water, and nutrients to thrive
- **Blossoms (Creative Development & Conception):** Transform organizational energy into creative possibilities, naturally attract cross-pollination through cooperation, draw in diverse perspectives that enrich fruit development
- **Fruits (Products/Services):** Tangible value creation from fully conceived and cross-pollinated blossoms, market offerings, resource generation
- **Birds (External Contributors):** Freelancers, consultants, students providing temporary value and cross-pollination
- **Weather (External Environment):** Market conditions, industry trends, economic climate

LSF Framework Components

The LSF Team

System Guardian

The System Guardian establishes LSF within the organization and ensures its healthy implementation.

Key responsibilities:

- *Coach the organization in LSF implementation and natural work approaches*
- *Support nutrient flow, ensuring resources reach where needed without oversaturation or starvation*
- *Orchestrate harmony between different work rhythms across the organizational tree*
- *Facilitate LSF ceremonies and maintain their positive, productive nature*
- *Cultivate Cultivated Life Points through seasonal awareness and anticipatory stewardship*
- *Remove barriers between stakeholders and teams*

Value Cultivator (Product Owner equivalent)

The Value Cultivator maximizes the value of work by managing organizational priorities effectively.

Key responsibilities:

- *Develop and communicate organizational purpose*
- *Create and prioritize growth initiatives for maximum impact*
- *Ensure transparency of priorities and reasoning*
- *Ensure work is understood by all involved*

Growth Teams (Development Team equivalent)

Growth Teams create valuable increments every cycle and are self-managing and cross-functional.

Key characteristics:

- *Small enough to remain nimble (typically 10 or fewer people)*
- *Have all skills necessary to create value*
- *Accountable for creating valuable increments*
- *Manage their own work and resource allocation*

LSF Events

All events are timeboxed. Once a cycle begins, its duration is fixed and cannot be shortened or lengthened.

The Natural Growth Cycle

The heart of LSF is the Natural Growth Cycle, with duration determined by the nature of the work and team context. Cycles create predictable patterns that honor both the need for growth and the wisdom of reflection, following rhythms that suit each department's unique needs.

Cycle Length Examples by Work Type:

- **Social Media Teams:** 1-week cycles for rapid content creation and audience response
- **Development Teams:** 2-week cycles for feature development and testing
- **Management Teams:** 4-6 week cycles for strategic planning and coordination
- **Research Teams:** 6-12 week cycles for investigation and analysis
- **Creative Teams:** Variable cycles based on project scope and inspiration patterns

Natural Cycle Phases: Regardless of length, each cycle flows through four complementary phases:

- **Initiation & Growing:** Period for fresh starts, creative surges, and building momentum
- **Peak Development:** Period of maximum energy and collaborative power
- **Harvest & Integration:** Period for completion, reflection, and quality refinement
- **Rest & Preparation:** Period for reflection, learning, and preparing the next cycle

Teams naturally flow between these phases within each cycle, allowing for sustainable development patterns that honor both creative energy and reflective wisdom. The system grows stronger through rhythms that match the work's natural pace.

Department-Specific Adaptations:

- **Employee Support:** Continuous attention to individual needs for clarity, resources, and development. Cycle length should allow meaningful support without overwhelming frequency.
- **Creative Development:** Flexible cycles following inspiration and breakthrough patterns. Length varies based on creative scope - from rapid prototyping (1 week) to major innovations (8+ weeks).
- **Production/Delivery:** Cycles aligned with delivery schedules and customer needs. Fast-moving products may need weekly cycles, complex systems may need monthly cycles.
- **Leadership/Operations:** Longer cycles for strategic work, shorter cycles for operational coordination. Often 4-8 weeks to allow meaningful strategic progress.

Nested and Asynchronous Cycles: Different parts of the organizational tree may require shorter or asynchronous cycles nested within the main Growth Cycle, depending on their specific needs:

- **Branches (Teams/Departments)** may need weekly coordination cycles
- **Leaves (Knowledge/Innovation)** might operate on rapid learning cycles of days
- **Fruits (Products/Services)** could follow customer feedback cycles
- **Root System** may require longer seasonal cycles for cultural changes

Work Type Adaptations: Different parts of the organizational tree require different rhythms and support:

- **Leaf Care** (Employee Support): Continuous attention to individual needs for light, water, nutrients. Regular check-ins on leaf health and vitality. Protection from overwhelming demands. Healthy leaves are foundation for all organizational life.
- **Blossom Cycles** (Creative Development): Flexible exploration cycles following inspiration and breakthrough patterns. Extended growing phases for ideation, prototyping, and experimentation. Life Points reached when concepts are clear, tested, and ready for production.
- **Fruit Cycles** (Production/Delivery): Steady implementation cycles with well-conceived requirements from completed blossoms. Balanced growing/waning phases for development and quality assurance. Life Points aligned with delivery schedules and customer readiness.
- **Stem/Root Support** (Leadership/Operations): Consistent support rhythms that nourish all parts of the organization. Focus on nutrient distribution and system health maintenance. Ensuring healthy resource flow to leaves, blossoms, and fruits.

These nested cycles must align with and support the main Growth Cycle while respecting the natural rhythms of each work type and organizational component.

Cycle Planning

Cycle Planning initiates the Growth Cycle by laying out work to be performed. The entire LSF Team collaborates on this work.

Topics for Cycle Planning:

- Why is this cycle valuable?
- What can be completed this cycle?
- How will chosen work get done?

Cycle Planning timeboxed to maximum of 8 hours for one-month cycle.

Daily System Check

The purpose of Daily System Check is to inspect progress and adapt upcoming work. Growth Team members inspect work since last Daily System Check and forecast upcoming work.

Structure:

- What did I complete yesterday that helped meet our cycle goal?
- What will I do today to help meet cycle goal?
- Do I see any impediments that prevent me or Growth Team from meeting goal?

Daily System Check is timeboxed to 15 minutes.

Cycle Review

Cycle Review examines increment created during cycle and adapts organizational priorities if needed. Growth Team presents results to key stakeholders.

Cycle Review includes:

- *Review of what was completed and what wasn't*
- *Discussion of problems encountered and solutions found*
- *Demonstration of completed work*
- *Discussion of next likely items to work on*

Cycle Review timeboxed to 4 hours for one-month cycle.

Cycle Retrospective

Cycle Retrospective provides opportunity for Growth Team to inspect itself and create plan for improvements during next cycle.

Cycle Retrospective examines:

- *How the last cycle went with regards to individuals, interactions, processes, tools, and system health*
- *What went well during cycle*
- *What problems were encountered and how they were (or weren't) solved*
- *Most important improvements to try next cycle*

Cycle Retrospective timeboxed to 3 hours for one-month cycle.

LSF Living Elements

LSF's living elements represent the current state and flow of the organizational ecosystem, providing transparency and opportunities for sensing and adaptation.

Living Priorities

An organic, evolving sense of what wants to grow and flourish in the organization. These priorities shift and flow like water finding its natural course, representing the collective wisdom about where energy wants to go.

Living Priority qualities:

- *Description of what wants to emerge*
- *Natural order based on readiness and seasonal timing*
- *Sense of energy required and life-giving potential*
- *Life Point recognition criteria - how we'll know when it's ripe*

Cycle Intention

The living purpose that guides each lunar cycle - not a rigid goal but a gentle direction that allows work to flow and emerge organically while maintaining coherence.

Living Increment

A tangible expression of the organization's growth - work that has reached natural completion and contributes to the overall vitality. Each increment adds to the living system's capacity and coherence, ready to be integrated whether or not it's immediately deployed.

Life Points and Natural Completion

*LSF recognizes **Life Points** - natural moments when work becomes functional and alive, like fruit ripening on a tree or tides reaching their natural peak. These organic completion points honor the natural development cycles of work and teams.*

Types of Life Points

Emerging Life Points: *Natural completion moments that arise during organic creative productivity spikes*

- *Work reaches functional readiness during natural creative flows*
- *Like flowers blooming when conditions are right*
- *Quality emerges spontaneously rather than being forced*
- *Team energy aligns with creative breakthrough moments*
- *Solutions crystallize organically through exploration*

Cultivated Life Points: *Intentionally stewarded completion moments where work is tended to ripen with time for proper aging before it's needed*

- *Like planting seeds in spring knowing they'll be needed for summer harvest*
- *System Guardian actively tends and supports development toward anticipated needs*
- *Work completes with buffer time for maturation, refinement, and quality aging*
- *Proactive cultivation based on seasonal awareness and future opportunities*
- *Not driven by external pressure but by wise anticipation and careful stewardship*
- *Allows for proper integration, testing, and natural enhancement before deployment*

Critical Life Points: *Moments where external dependencies require completion, approached by growing strong for the season rather than rushing toward an abyss*

- *External factors create natural completion windows*
- *Like preparing for harvest season or storm season*
- *We cultivate strength and capability that naturally grows to meet the challenge*
- *"Growing strong for the season" - building resilience that matures before the critical moment*
- *Timing work to flow with rather than against natural organizational rhythms*
- *Avoiding disruption of the organism's natural development cycles*

Cultivating Early Life Points

LSF creates optimal conditions for Life Points to emerge as early as naturally possible through environmental optimization:

Lighting Optimization: *Clear vision, transparent information flow, bright communication channels* **Nutrient Flow Enhancement:** *Streamlined access to resources, rich feedback loops, elimination of bottlenecks*

Environmental Conditions: *Psychological safety, collaborative spaces, protection from disruption*

Natural acceleration techniques include providing abundant resources during growing phases, creating multiple parallel paths, removing artificial barriers, and celebrating emerging completions to reinforce natural cycles.

Daily Rhythms: *Recognition of natural energy peaks and valleys*

- *Morning creative energy for complex problem-solving*
- *Afternoon collaboration for integration work*
- *Evening reflection for planning and synthesis*

Weekly Patterns: *Honoring natural work flow cycles*

- *Monday initiation energy*
- *Mid-week momentum building*
- *Friday integration and completion*

Monthly Cycles: *Aligning with natural planning and reflection patterns*

- *Cycle initiation phases for planning and goal setting*
- *Cycle completion phases for celebration and review*
- *Development periods for growth and building*
- *Integration periods for refinement and preparation*

Seasonal Rhythms: *Organizational seasons that mirror natural cycles*

- *Spring: Innovation, new initiatives, creative exploration*
- *Summer: Peak productivity, collaboration, full growth*
- *Autumn: Harvest, completion, knowledge capture*
- *Winter: Reflection, planning, root strengthening*

Tidal Flows: *Recognition of natural ebb and flow in organizational energy*

- *High tide moments of intense collaboration and breakthrough*
- *Low tide periods for individual focus and deep work*
- *Transition periods for integration and preparation*

Life Point Indicators

Emerging Life Points:

- *Work feels complete and coherent*
- *Team confidence and excitement builds naturally*
- *Next steps become clear without forcing*
- *Stakeholder enthusiasm emerges organically*
- *System feels more integrated and alive*

Cultivated Life Points:

- *Work reaches functional completion ahead of anticipated need*
- *Quality has time to mature and deepen through proper aging*
- *Buffer time allows for refinement and integration without pressure*
- *System Guardian's careful tending has created optimal timing*
- *Future readiness creates calm confidence rather than last-minute stress*
- *Work feels both complete and ready for its eventual season*

Critical Life Points:

- *External dependencies create natural completion windows*
- *Organizational momentum has grown to meet the challenge*
- *Team feels prepared rather than pressured*
- *Resources and capability align with timing requirements*
- *The system has grown strong enough for the season*

System Health Metrics

LSF emphasizes ecosystem vitality over traditional productivity metrics, recognizing that healthy organisms naturally produce abundant fruit when their fundamental needs are met:

Core Vitality Indicators

- **Nutrient Flow:** *How efficiently energy, information, and resources circulate through the organizational ecosystem, like a healthy forest's nutrient cycles*
- **Growth Patterns:** *Whether development follows sustainable, seasonal patterns rather than forced artificial growth spurts*
- **Adaptation Capacity:** *Organization's ability to flex and respond to environmental changes, like trees bending with wind rather than breaking*
- **Integration Quality:** *How harmoniously different parts work together, like organs in a healthy body*
- **Regeneration Rate:** *Organization's ability to recover, renew, and strengthen itself through natural cycles*

Seasonal Health Patterns

- **Spring Indicators:** *New initiatives sprouting, creative energy rising, innovation flowering*
- **Summer Indicators:** *Peak collaboration, maximum growth, abundant energy flow*
- **Autumn Indicators:** *Successful harvest, knowledge crystallization, mature completion*
- **Winter Indicators:** *Healthy rest, root strengthening, wise preparation for next cycle*

Warning Signs of System Imbalance

- *Artificial completion patterns disrupting natural rhythms*
- *Declining team wellbeing and ecosystem vitality*
- *Increasing technical debt and accumulated stress*
- *Communication breaking down like ecosystem disruption*
- *Resistance to natural change and adaptation cycles*
- *Chronic emergency modes interrupting seasonal flow*

Implementation Guidance

Getting Started

1. *Begin with one Growth Team and committed System Guardian*
2. *Choose cycle length based on your work's natural rhythm (see examples in Natural Growth Cycle section)*
3. *Focus on Life Points emergence and natural completion timing*
4. *Identify clear Value Cultivator and establish Living Priorities*
5. *Experiment and adjust cycle length based on what works for your context*

Framework Essence

While organizations adapt LSF to their context, the essential elements create the framework's living nature: Natural Growth Cycles (of appropriate length), all LSF ceremonies, accountable roles, and Life Points guiding completion. Cycle length should match the natural rhythm of the work.

Growing the Forest

Multiple Growth Teams coordinate through shared System Guardians, organization-wide Living Priorities, and careful attention to cross-team dependencies. Different teams can operate on different cycle lengths while maintaining organizational coherence through synchronized planning periods and shared Life Points.

Conclusion

LSF helps organizations develop sustainably by working with natural patterns. The framework's strength lies in its simplicity and foundation in empiricism and organic systems thinking.

The ceremonies, roles, and living elements of LSF work together as a complete system. Organizations succeed with LSF when they embrace its values and principles, work with natural development cycles, and focus on system health alongside value creation.

The framework provides structure while preserving the organic nature of growth and adaptation. It creates space for both productivity and the natural need for reflection, integration, and renewal.

LSF → Laissez-faire! → Trust your people!

This guide represents the foundational elements of Living Systems Framework. For implementation support, training, or advanced techniques, consider engaging with certified LSF practitioners.