

The Cognitive Orchestration Reference

The complete methodology on one page: seven first principles, a five-layer architecture, a six-phase workflow, two harnesses, and a family of domain applications. Free to read, cite, and build on under CC BY 4.0.

Overview

Cognitive Orchestration (CO) is the open, domain-agnostic methodology for structuring human-AI collaboration. It is the layer *above* the execution tools: it governs the collaboration, not the software, and works with any model, agent, or vendor.

CO holds that in the era of capable agents, raw model capability is a commodity and an organization's institutional knowledge is its durable advantage. The methodology exists to make that knowledge explicit, enforceable, and compounding. It comprises three parts: **seven first principles** (why), a **five-layer architecture** (what), and a **six-phase workflow** (how).

The seven first principles

Institutional Knowledge Thesis

The frontier model is a commodity every competitor rents. What your organization knows — its conventions, guardrails, and hard-won lessons — is the durable, defensible asset. CO makes that knowledge explicit and reusable.

The Brilliant New Hire

Each AI session is a capable generalist with total amnesia. Treat it like an exceptional new hire: give it structured onboarding every time, not a one-off prompt.

Three Failure Modes

AI fails in production three predictable ways — amnesia (it forgets your instructions), convention drift (it follows the internet's conventions, not yours), and safety blindness (it takes the shortest path, rarely the safe one). Design for all three.

Human-on-the-Loop

The human is neither in the loop typing every line nor out of the loop hoping. They define the operating envelope and observe outcomes; the system executes autonomously inside it.

Deterministic Enforcement

The rules that must never break are enforced outside the model — by code that blocks — not by asking the model nicely. Probabilistic compliance is insufficient for production-critical constraints.

Bainbridge's Irony

The more the AI does, the more the human's deep understanding matters.
Automation raises the stakes of expertise; it does not retire it.

Knowledge Compounds

Every session should make the next one faster. Lessons are captured and re-injected, so the system's competence accrues instead of resetting at each context boundary.

The five-layer architecture

Each layer encodes a decision a human makes; the machine then executes inside it. Learning (Layer 5) feeds back to Context (Layer 2) — the loop by which knowledge compounds.

1 • Intent ENCODES: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Route work to the right specialized configuration rather than one generalist doing everything. Intent selects who — which agent, role, or specialist — should hold a given task.

2 • Context ENCODES: INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Write down what the organization knows in a form the machine can read, with a single source of truth for each fact. Context is the durable memory the model lacks.

3 • Guardrails ENCODES: RISK TOLERANCE

Encode the constraints that must hold — the must-never-break rules — and enforce the critical ones deterministically, outside the model's reach.

4 • Instructions ENCODES: PROCESS MATURITY

Move work through defined phases with explicit approval gates, rather than one monolithic prompt. Instructions govern how work proceeds.

5 • Learning ENCODES: COMPOUNDING

Observe how the system performs, capture recurring patterns and fixes, and — with human approval — promote them into durable artifacts. Learning closes the loop back to Context.

The six-phase workflow

Work moves through six phases. Only two — Plan and Release — require a human authority gate; the remaining four converge autonomously. High autonomy, human authority exactly where it counts.

Analyze

Understand and pressure-test the work before building.

AUTONOMOUS

Plan

Turn intent into an approved roadmap.

HUMAN GATE

Implement

Build one task at a time, verifiably.

AUTONOMOUS

Validate

Attack the work adversarially before reality does.

AUTONOMOUS

Codify

Capture what was learned so the next session starts ahead.

AUTONOMOUS

Release

Ship with explicit human authorization.

HUMAN GATE

The two harnesses

A **harness** is what makes the methodology real in a working environment. CO distinguishes two.

The artifact harness

Mints institutional knowledge into durable artifacts (specialist configurations, skills, rules, enforcement hooks, commands), circulates them to everywhere you build, observes how they perform, and refines them. The open reference implementation is the WEFT cascade — `mint` → `classify` → `distribute` → `pull` → `observe` → `refine` — whose public implementation is `terrene-foundation/loom`.

The build harness

The targets that consume the artifacts to produce running software: build SDKs, project templates, command-line entrypoints, and operational tooling. No single target is the center; each is one way to turn methodology into shipped work.

The domain family

The same principles, adapted to a kind of work. Each domain instantiates the five layers against its own three failure modes. The list is a template, not a limit — new domains are derived in the open.

COC

Codegen

AI-assisted software development with institutional memory.

COR

Research

Human-directed inquiry where the AI teaches and the human authors.

COE

Education

Assessment of the human-AI collaboration itself, not just the output.

COG

Governance

Standards, policy, and constitutional work that shows its reasoning.

COF

Finance

Judgment-heavy operations run on the loop, with accountable delegation.

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