Doctrine 04 — Gates and Governance

One durable concept: the pipeline runs on permission, and permission is a governance decision.

A pipeline without gates is a rumor mill. This doctrine is about the **governance** of the pursuit: who decides, at what point, based on what evidence, and how the organization stays honest when the adrenaline is high.

The problem gates solve

Every pursuit feels worth doing at the moment it appears. That is precisely why organizations need gates: **human beings systematically overestimate the value of the thing in front of them.** The solicitation that just dropped looks like *the one*. The gate is the mechanism that forces the question *would this still be the one if we looked at the whole portfolio?*

Gates turn three scarce resources into decisions:

- **Attention** — capture capacity is finite; a pursuit that consumes it has a real cost.
- **Money** — pursuit cost, bid cost, and the price-to-win all spend real dollars.
- **Reputation** — a poorly handled pursuit with a customer burns trust that outlasts the pursuit.

A gate exists to force the trade into the open before the resources are spent.

What a gate is

A gate is a checkpoint with four parts:

1. **A trigger** — work pauses here, by rule, not by mood.
2. **Criteria** — written in advance, passable or not.
3. **A decision** — proceed, proceed with conditions, or stop.
4. **An owner** — a person (or a defined role) accountable for the call.

The most important property is the second. If the criteria are invented at the meeting, the gate is not governance — it is a rubber stamp. Good criteria sound like: *"Does the customer know us? Do we have the past performance? Is the estimated value above our floor? Do we have the capacity?"* Answerable questions, decided in advance.

The gate vocabulary you will meet

This course uses a few gate words; learn them once and they will appear everywhere:

- **Bid / no-bid** — the early, strategic gate: *should this be a pursuit at all?* A disciplined "no" is a professional outcome.

- **Threshold** — the score gate: *does this pursuit clear the bar we set for probability and value?* (Doctrine 05.)
- **Review gates** — the production gates: the **color-team sequence** that audits a proposal as it matures. The full sequence runs *blue* (optional solution-shaping), *pink* (compliance and coverage), *red* (evaluator-stance scoring), *gold* (the executive submit / revise / withdraw call), *white-glove* (production polish), and *black-hat* (a final adversarial pass against overconfidence). (The case study exercises them; literacy/how-color-teams-work.md is the working reference.)
- **Readiness gate** — the pre-submission gate: *is this package ready to represent us?* This is the last gate that can still stop a bad submission.

The color-team discipline

The color-team sequence is not a menu — it is a discipline with rules, and the rules are what make the reviews worth their cost:

- **Each color simulates a different reader.** Blue thinks like a customer-side architect, pink like a Section L/M compliance checker, red like a government evaluator scoring against the published factors, gold like the executive who must own the decision, white-glove like a production editor, and black-hat like a hostile evaluator and a rival capture manager rolled into one. The sequence exists so every important reader has already looked at the proposal before it ships.
- **Reviewers are independent of writers.** No reviewer evaluates a section they drafted; a review done by the writers is a peer-check, not an evaluation.
- **Findings must be specific.** A real finding names the evaluation factor at issue, the evidence that is missing or weak, and the specific revision required. Vague findings produce vague revisions, so they are rejected.
- **The sequence is forward-only.** Pink before red, red before gold, gold before white-glove — always. No skipping a color, and no substituting one combined review for the sequence.
- **The bluntest rule of all:** any red rating on a critical evaluation factor blocks submission. The rating semantics — outstanding, acceptable, marginal, unacceptable — exist so the review produces a decision, not a vibe.

The deeper point is that the color team is a rehearsal of the actual evaluation: a chance to be hurt by your own reviewers while there is still time to fix it, instead of by the agency after the deadline.

The industry's gate ladder: the BD lifecycle

This course's gate words are one accent of a professional vocabulary. The industry's standard business-development (BD) lifecycle describes the same discipline as a seven-gate ladder — *market segmentation, opportunity identification, pur-*

suit decision, capture readiness, proposal planning and production, submission mechanics, and post-submission (orals, negotiation, debrief) — with defined entry and exit criteria at every rung. Doctrine 09 teaches the capture gates in depth; Doctrine 10 teaches the post-submission gate; the color-team and volume pages cover the middle.

The framing matters for one reason: **when a practitioner anywhere in this industry says "we're at gate 4," they mean the same thing as this course's capture stage coming to its readiness decision.** The ladder is the pipeline's gate vocabulary spoken in the profession's standard language. Learn it once, and you can read any organization's pursuit process — or any playbook, course, or conversation in this field — and know immediately where in the pipeline you are standing.

The human side: who owns the call

There are two modes of gate ownership, and healthy organizations mix them:

- **The owner with standing** — a senior person whose authority comes from position. Fast, decisive, but only as good as their information.
- **The owner with process** — a role whose authority comes from the rule: the compliance officer who says "this cannot ship without the signature." Less glamorous, and often the reason the organization survives.

The deep governance insight is that **the best gate is the one that makes the decision boring.** When the criteria are clear, the evidence is assembled, and the owner is accountable, the dramatic meeting dissolves into a check of boxes. Governance is the art of making important decisions boring on purpose.

Governance across the life of a pursuit

Governance is not a single gate; it is a ladder. The pursuit becomes more expensive and more real at every rung, and each rung has its own authority:

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level of commitment
 ▲                        ┌─ submit (executive sign-off)
 │                        ├─ audit (review team sign-off)
 │                    ┌───┴─ design (capture lead owns)
 │                ┌───┴─── score (portfolio owner decides threshold)
 │            ┌───┴─── qualify (bid/no-bid owner decides)
 └────────────┴─── sense (everyone, continuously)
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Notice what this ladder implies: **the further a pursuit advances, the more expensive the decision to stop — and the more important that it be a decision, not an accident.** An organization that lacks a submit gate will ship bad proposals. An organization that lacks a qualify gate will drown in good ones.

Ethics and fairness: governance is also the law

There is a second meaning of governance, and it is not optional: the public side of the transaction is governed by law and policy that exist to keep the competition fair. The FAR (Federal Acquisition Regulation) and the federal grants policy are not style guides — they are enforceable rules about how money is spent. When you learn to read an RFP or NOFO in this course, you are learning where the governance lives: the deadlines that bind the agency too, the evaluation criteria the agency is committing to, the certifications that carry legal weight.

A pursuer who respects the rules is a professional. A pursuer who games them is not merely unethical — they are, eventually, in legal trouble, and they harm the trust that the whole market depends on. Governance on the private side (our gates) and governance on the public side (the law) are two halves of one system.

What this means for your career

Gate literacy is leadership literacy. The person who can look at a room full of excitement about an opportunity and ask *"what would the gate say?"* is the person who protects the organization's attention, money, and reputation. That skill is rare, visible, and valued in every sector — government, industry, and nonprofit alike.

For the Strategic Initiative student, gates are the architecture of how the organization allocates its bets. For the MBA student, gates are the funnel control: where conversion is lost and where leverage lives. For the MPA student, gates are the public-side discipline: how accountability is structured into spending. All three meet at the same question — *who decides, on what evidence, and how do we keep the decision honest?*

Self-check

1. What are the four parts of a gate, and which one keeps a gate from being a rubber stamp?
2. Name the gate words this course uses and what each protects. Name one rule of the color-team discipline and one way the industry's BD lifecycle ladder matches this course's pipeline.
3. How are private-side gates and public-side governance (law and policy) two halves of one system?