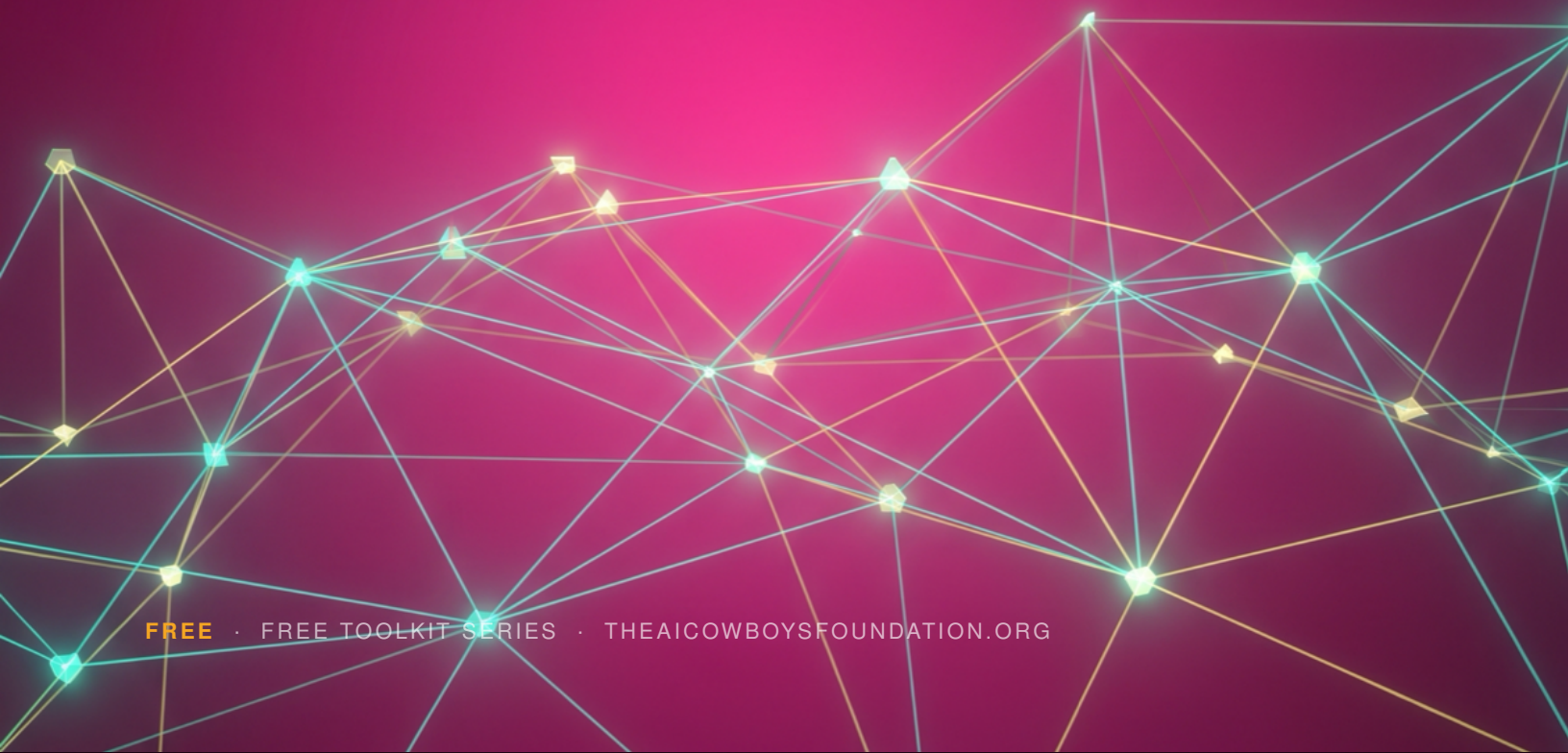
THE AI COWBOYS FOUNDATION

TOOLKIT 02 · GOVERNANCE

# AI Governance Checklist

Stand up responsible AI step by step, aligned with the NIST AI Risk Management Framework.



# AI Governance Checklist



Governance is simply knowing what your AI does, and being able to show it.

A practical checklist for standing up responsible AI. Work through it in order. You do not need every item on day one, but you should know where you stand on each. Aligned in spirit with the NIST AI Risk Management Framework, which organizes the work into Govern, Map, Measure, and Manage.

## Why governance is not optional anymore

Governance used to be something large enterprises worried about. That changed. Regulators, funders, insurers, and the public now expect any organization using AI to show its work. The NIST AI Risk Management Framework has become the shared reference point in the United States, and it is voluntary, free, and readable.

**4**

functions in the NIST framework: Govern, Map, Measure, Manage

**3**

Texas laws now mandate AI governance for public agencies

**6 mo**

is the right cadence to review your policy and controls

The single most useful governance habit is ranking each use case by risk. Not every use of AI carries the same weight, and treating a drafting assistant like a benefits screening tool wastes effort on one and underprotects the other.

**Risk tiers: how to rank an AI use case**




**Rank every use case before you deploy it.** Risk rises with how much the system decides on its own and how much its decisions affect people.

REAL WORLD: TEXAS WROTE GOVERNANCE INTO LAW

Texas did not stop at recommending governance. Under Government Code 2054.702, the Texas Department of Information Resources established a statewide AI code of ethics and minimum risk management and governance standards for AI systems that receive heightened scrutiny. Under 2054.711, any state agency or local government that deploys a public facing AI system, or one that is a controlling factor in a consequential decision, must display a standardized public notice.

**The lesson:** governance is moving from best practice to legal requirement, starting with the public sector. Organizations that build the habit now will not be scrambling later.

## Govern: set the foundation

- [ ] A named person or team owns AI decisions and this checklist.
- [ ] A written AI use policy exists and staff have read it.
- [ ] Approved tools are listed, with a data agreement for each.
- [ ] Staff know how to ask a question or raise a concern.
- [ ] Leadership has agreed on what AI will and will not be used for.

## Map: understand your uses and risks

- [ ] Every AI use case is written down with its purpose and owner.
- [ ] Each use case has a risk tier: low, medium, or high.
- [ ] Uses that affect people carry a higher tier and extra review.
- [ ] You know what data each tool touches and where it goes.
- [ ] You have checked for bias in uses that sort, score, or rank people.

## Measure: check that it works

- [ ] Each use case has a success measure and a person who tracks it.
- [ ] Outputs are spot checked for accuracy on a regular schedule.
- [ ] Results are reviewed across the groups you serve, not just on average.
- [ ] Problems and near misses are logged and reviewed.

## Manage: keep it safe over time

- [ ] A person reviews and approves high tier decisions before they take effect.
- [ ] There is a way to pause or roll back a tool that causes harm.
- [ ] Access to sensitive tools and data is limited to those who need it.
- [ ] The policy and this checklist are reviewed every six months.
- [ ] New tools go through review before staff use them for real work.

## Scoring

Count your checked boxes.

| Score | Where you stand | Your next move |
|---|---|---|
| 0 to 8 | Early | Start with an owner, a policy, and an approved tool list. |
| 9 to 16 | Building | You have a foundation. Focus on risk tiers and human oversight. |

| Score | Where you stand | Your next move |
|---|---|---|
| 17 to 22 | Mature | Keep measuring, keep reviewing, and share what you learn. |

**WORKED EXAMPLE: TIERING A REAL USE CASE**

**Use case:** an assistant that drafts replies to routine resident emails, which a staff member reviews before sending.

**Impact on people:** low. A person approves every reply. **System autonomy:** low. It only drafts. **Tier: LOW.** Light review, spot checks monthly.

**Now change one thing:** the same assistant auto sends replies with no human review. **System autonomy:** high. **Tier jumps to MEDIUM or HIGH,** because a wrong answer now reaches a resident unchecked. The tool did not change. The autonomy did, and so did the risk.

## The three checks that matter most

If you only do three things from this list, do these:

1. **Name an owner.** Governance without a name attached is a suggestion.
2. **Tier your risks.** A drafting assistant and a benefits screening tool are not the same. Treating them the same wastes effort on one and underprotects the other.
3. **Keep a person in the loop.** For any decision that affects a person, a qualified reviewer approves the outcome. This single habit prevents the worst failures.

## Sources and further reading


- NIST AI Risk Management Framework, National Institute of Standards and Technology
- NIST AI Resource Center and Playbook, National Institute of Standards and Technology
- AI and Innovation at Texas DIR, Texas Department of Information Resources
- Texas DIR AI templates and resources, Texas Department of Information Resources
- America's AI strategy and federal actions, The White House

PUT THIS TO WORK

## Want help applying this in your organization?

The AI Cowboys Foundation delivers free briefings, workshops, and readiness assessments for business, government, classrooms, and veteran programs. Tell us what you are working on and we will point you to the right next step.

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