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Chesterton's fence

The principle that you should not remove a rule, custom or structure until you know why it was put there.

How it works

1. Someone built every fence, rule or custom with effort, so someone once had a reason.
2. If you cannot see that reason, you are probably missing part of the picture.
3. So first find out what the fence was for and what it still does today.
4. Then judge the reason: keep the fence, change it, or remove it knowing the cost.

Example

Debian's deleted OpenSSL code line, 2006

- A testing tool flagged one line in OpenSSL's random number generator as an error.
- The flagged line also fed the generator its real random data from the computer.

→ OpenSSL on Debian and Ubuntu could make only about 32,000 different keys of each type and size.

→ In May 2008 Debian told users to replace every key made since September 2006.

Use it for

- ✓ Questioning an approval step at work before you abolish it
- ✓ Changing an old family habit that seems to have no point
- ✓ Judging a politician's promise to scrap a rule as pointless

Watch out

- ✗ Chesterton's fence asks you to understand an old rule, not to keep every old rule.
- ✗ When nobody can find the reason, remove the fence in a way you can undo.

Remember Before removing something that looks useless, find out what problem it was solving.