Chesterton's Fence

Idea In Short

Before you cut a rule, a committee or a legacy process, find out who put it there and why. Chesterton's fence is a century-old test for reform: don't remove a barrier until you understand the purpose it serves. Executives who skip this step routinely reintroduce the exact problem an old rule was built to prevent, then pay twice to solve it. The fix is procedural, not philosophical. Before eliminating anything, trace its origin, interview the people who lived through the conditions that created it and document what would happen if it disappeared tomorrow. If the reasoning no longer holds, remove the fence with confidence. If it still holds, redesign around the underlying risk instead of deleting the safeguard. Apply this test to every deregulation, restructuring and process-simplification initiative before it starts, not after it fails.

A newly appointed operations chief looks at an approval step that adds three days to every purchase order and cannot find a single person who remembers why it exists. The instinct is to cut it. That instinct, applied without investigation, is exactly the failure mode G.K. Chesterton described a century before "process redesign" became a job title. His test is short enough to fit on a sticky note and disciplined enough to prevent some of the costliest mistakes executives make:

> removing a safeguard whose purpose nobody bothered to ask about

The Origin of a Simple Test

Chesterton, an English writer and critic, laid out the idea in a 1929 essay collection called "The Thing."1 He was arguing against reformers who tore down old institutions simply because they could not immediately see the point of them. His illustration was a fence built across a road.

> There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, "I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away." To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: "If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it."

The passage was written about social institutions, not corporate ones, but the logic transfers cleanly. A rule that survives inside an organization for years usually got there because it solved a real problem at some point. The fact that the problem is no longer visible does not mean the rule stopped working; it might mean the rule is still working, quietly and that is why nobody remembers the crisis it prevents.

Why Consultants Keep Hitting the Same Fence

Efficiency work is where this principle earns its keep or gets ignored at real cost. A team hired to remove friction from a process has every incentive to treat unexplained steps as waste, because waste is what they were hired to find. McKinsey's research on organizational change points to a related pattern: leaders consistently underestimate how much of an organization's behavior is shaped by history, incentives and prior failures that never made it into a written policy.2 Rational-sounding recommendations fail because the recommender never located the rational reason the current state exists.

Three-day purchase approvals, redundant sign-offs, duplicate data entry between two systems that "should" talk to each other, all of these look like waste on a process map. Some of them are. Others were built after a specific loss: a fraud incident, a regulatory finding, a vendor default, a customer data breach. The map does not show any of that history and the consultant reading it has no way to distinguish a fence built by accident from a fence built by scar tissue.

The Anatomy of an Invisible Rule

Not every unexplained rule has the same origin and treating them as a single category leads to sloppy diagnosis.

Compliance scars

Some controls exist because a regulator, auditor or court forced the organization's hand after a specific failure. These rules often outlive the individuals who negotiated them and the paperwork that explained them, leaving behind only the requirement itself. Removing one without checking the regulatory history is how organizations relearn old lessons at new expense.

Political compromises

Other rules exist because two departments once fought over authority and a rule was the truce. The underlying tension can resurface the moment the rule disappears, even if nobody remembers the original fight. A consultant who deletes the rule without understanding the compromise it represents may simply reopen the conflict.

Tribal knowledge with no owner

The most fragile category is the rule that exists purely because "that's how we've always done it", with no traceable incident behind it at all. These are genuinely safe to remove, but they look identical to the first two categories from the outside. The only way to tell them apart is to ask and treating unlearning as disloyalty to institutional history is what keeps leaders from asking in the first place.3

A Method for Testing the Fence Before You Remove It

The discipline Chesterton described can be operationalized into a short sequence that fits inside a normal transformation timeline and it turns a vague warning against terrible decisions into a repeatable checklist.4

1. Identify who created the rule, or who has been closest to it the longest and interview them directly rather than relying on documentation alone
2. Reconstruct the conditions that existed when the rule was introduced, including any incident, audit finding or organizational conflict tied to its origin
3. Test whether those conditions still hold today and if they do not, document exactly

why they have changed
4. Design the removal, or the replacement control, around the specific risk the original rule managed, rather than deleting it outright

This sequence rarely takes long. Most rules can be traced and explained within a few conversations. The cost of skipping it is not measured in the time saved during diagnosis; it is measured months later, when the removed control's absence becomes visible in the form of an incident nobody predicted because nobody looked backward before moving forward.

When the Fence Should Come Down

None of this is an argument for preserving every inherited rule. Applied without a time limit, Chesterton's fence becomes a tool for obstruction rather than discipline and critics of the idea have pointed this out directly. Economist Bryan Caplan has argued that the test, taken too literally, can hand a permanent veto to anyone defending the status quo, since "I haven't fully understood it yet" is always available as a stalling tactic.5 The principle asks for an investigation with an endpoint, not indefinite caution.

Once the investigation is done and the original purpose is either obsolete or was never sound to begin with, the correct move is to remove the rule and move on. The goal is not reverence for the past, it is accurate diagnosis of the present.

Applying It Beyond a Single Process

The same test scales up to policy and regulatory reform, where the stakes of guessing wrong multiply. A rule buried in decades of statute can look like pure administrative clutter to a reformer reading it cold, while carrying an enforcement history that only becomes visible after the rule is gone and the problem it suppressed returns.6 Deregulation efforts that skip the investigation step tend to repeat failures the original rule was written to close off and by the time the pattern is obvious, the institutional memory needed to explain it has usually left the building.

The same caution applies inside a single business unit facing a smaller decision, such as whether to eliminate a legacy sign-off or merge two departments that have operated separately for a decade. Scale changes the stakes, not the method.

Building the Habit Into Governance

The most durable way to install this discipline is to make it a formal gate in change-management and deregulation processes rather than a personal habit some leaders remember and others skip. A short "origin check" section, added to any proposal that removes a policy, control or approval step, forces the author to document who built the rule, why and whether that reason still applies. Boards approving restructuring plans can require the same section before signing off on cuts. Sunset clauses work well as a complement: instead of removing a rule outright, attach a review date, which gives the organization a structured moment to revisit the fence rather than relying on someone noticing it years later. None of this requires new tooling or a large program. It requires one extra question, asked consistently, before the next reorganization begins.

Why This Test Outlasts Every Management Trend

Chesterton's fence has survived a century of management theory because it addresses a bias that never goes away: newcomers and reformers see the cost of a rule immediately and the reason for it only with effort. Every generation of executives inherits rules it did not write and every generation faces the same temptation to treat confusion as proof of uselessness. The discipline of asking first is cheap. The cost of skipping it shows up later, on someone else's watch, in a form that looks nothing like the fence that used to be there.

- 1G.K. Chesterton
- 2The Irrational Side Of Change Management
- 3The Leadership Competency Few Talk About: Unlearning What No Longer Serves You
- 4Use Chesterton's Fence To Avoid Terrible Decisions
- 5Misusing Chesterton's Fence
- 6Chesterton's Fence: A Lesson In Thinking

Summary

Chesterton's fence is not an argument for permanence, it is an argument for sequencing. Understand first, then decide. G.K. Chesterton's century-old test survives because organizations keep making the same mistake: treating an unexplained rule as an irrational one. The safeguard is procedural. Before removing a policy, an approval step or a legacy system, trace its origin, ask who built it and reconstruct the conditions it responded to. Most of the time the reasoning has expired and removal is safe. Occasionally the risk it managed is still live, just invisible from the current vantage point. Either outcome is fine, as long as the decision follows the investigation rather than skipping it. Leaders who install this discipline into their change processes remove fences faster and rebuild fewer of them.