An Extremely Effective Approach for Dealing with Behaviors that Seem Impervious to Change

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T.E. Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – wrote a book called Seven Pillars of Wisdom in which he provided allegorical stories to express what he had learned through his experiences.

In one such story a desert chieftain goes to his father, the old chieftain, for advice. The son explains he has been trying to take over an enemy fortress, but his efforts have been to no avail. The walls are too thick to breach, despite his many efforts. The people inside have enough food and water, such that his efforts at a siege that would starve them out have also failed. He cannot tunnel through the sand and bedrock beneath the fortress. He has exhausted the options he knows to use in the battle. What, he asks, can be done when confronting such a well-established, well dug-in situation? Must he just give up?

His father gives him the following sage advice: Get a spy inside the walls, he says. The spy is not to look for weaknesses in the defenses, as you might expect. No, rather the spy is there to find out what the people inside value. Is it money? Jewels? Dancing girls? When you discover what it is, then, he says, what to do becomes very simple:

Put more of what they value outside the walls than what they have within. If they value dancing girls, have 1000 dancing girls parading outside, if they value gems strew the sand with diamonds. You will not have to get in -- because they will instead open their gates themselves to come out to get what they so value.

I have always loved this story, and used it in helping myself and others make changes when the old behaviors seem unassailable and impervious to efforts to overcome them.

Find out what your current behavior values. What is the valuable thing it seeks or partly provides? Then find more of it in a new behavior. The old behavior can simply fall away as the new one becomes embraced. As human beings we rarely – perhaps never – choose what we see as the second best choice if we truly believe we can choose the better one.

The I Ching has a saying “The best way to fight evil is to make energetic progress in the good.” The sentiment here is essentially the same. Battling against behaviors can lead to stalemate, discouragement, and depletion. If reasonable efforts and strategies fail to produce the results you want – or if battling them is costly and/or destructive -- consider this approach instead. It has far less pain, struggle, and collateral damage than going the battle route.

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