



# Contrarian Edge

## Keys to the Kingdom

History teaches that it's not easy to build an empire. There are usually some battles, and you sure don't want to show up without a sword. But history also teaches that empire builders succeed because they master the art of standardization when it comes to winning.

And winning battles is exactly what health-care is all about—just ask patients battling for their lives or trying to make sense of an incomprehensible bill. Assuming you got up this morning with more than an it's-time-to-make-the-donuts shuffle, read on for some battlefield lessons.

**Lesson 1:** The Ch'in Dynasty, 221 to 206 BC, is credited with unifying a collection of independent states that continually warred among themselves. China owes its name to the Ch'in and their massive accomplishment of creating a country. As archeologists studied their ancient battlefields, they were astonished to find thousands of arrowheads of exactly the same size, metal alloy composition, and weight. The Ch'in were the inventors of mass production, something historians did not think occurred until the 1800s with Elias Howe and his sewing machine. Why standardize arrowheads? They gave the archer the ability to better judge distance, angle, and trajectory. Accurate firepower is a winner.

**Application:** Standardization of supplies, training, clinical protocols, and data. A study just released shows that doctors using computerized patient records have a 15% reduction in error rates. What group is

assigned to making standardization happen in your shop?

**Lesson 2:** Roman forts, both longstanding constructions and those built at the end of a day's march, followed a standardized layout. A rectangular ditch was dug, an inner hill or rampart was formed from the ditch outcast, and a log palisade surmounted the rampart. Every camp was divided into three areas. At the exact center was the commander's tent, the battle flags, and a tent with religious icons, commissary, and supplies. The area closest to the enemy was where crack troops were housed, with a rear area for horses and the other half of the troops. All streets and the four gates always had the same location and names. In the middle of a battle, it's critical for people to know where to go, know who does what, and have resources that are aligned for defensive and offensive contingencies. This do-it-the-same-way approach created the world's largest and longest lasting empire.

**Application:** Regina Herzlinger observed that healthcare management in recent times successfully created the strategy of a health system but failed to work through its operational details, management control systems, human resources approaches, and the formation of a management philosophy. The net effect is erratic quality and cost—often, patients can't even find their way around the building.

When I stop in at any McDonald's on the interstate, I know that off to the right of the counter toward the back of the building is where the washrooms are. The company

runs its forts pretty much the way the Romans ran theirs. I wonder how many minutes they save per restaurant per day giving directions because everyone knows their layout. What if hospitals were designed with a common floor plan?

Bill Marriott put it this way in *Spirit to Serve: Marriott's Way* (HarperCollins, 2001):

"At the most basic level, systems help bring order to the natural messiness of human enterprise. Give 100 people the same task—without providing ground rules—and you'll end up with at least a dozen, if not 100, different ways of doing it. Try that same experiment with a few thousand people, and you end up with chaos..."

"I'm always a little surprised when I come across companies that aren't as devoted to [systems] as we are. I often see wasted opportunities to improve performance, simply because no one seems to be focusing on developing, much less implementing and maintaining, systems and standards."

Strategic standardization is the key to your future empire, not a fad. Master it early and win, or keep trying to manage the chaos of too much variability in individual performance, sloppy systems, and the absence of defined protocols.

Clay Sherman, [drcly@GoldStandardManagement.org](mailto:drcly@GoldStandardManagement.org), is a key spokesperson for management professionalization and provides extensive free resources for organization high performance at [www.GoldStandardManagement.org](http://www.GoldStandardManagement.org).