

will jump to attention. After all, the students for whom I set the deadlines—for whom I provided the “parental” voice—did best. Of course, barking orders, while very effective, may not always be feasible or desirable. What’s a good compromise? It seems that the best course might be to give people an opportunity to commit up front to their preferred path of action. This approach might not be as effective as the dictatorial treatment, but it can help push us in the right direction (perhaps even more so if we train people to do it, and give them experience in setting their own deadlines).

What’s the bottom line? We have problems with self-control, related to immediate and delayed gratification—no doubt there. But each of the problems we face has potential self-control mechanisms, as well. If we can’t save from our paycheck, we can take advantage of our employer’s automatic deduction option; if we don’t have the will to exercise regularly alone, we can make an appointment to exercise in the company of our friends. These are the tools that we can commit to in advance, and they may help us be the kind of people we want to be.

WHAT OTHER PROCRASTINATION problems might precommitment mechanisms solve? Consider health care and consumer debt.

Health Care

Everyone knows that preventive medicine is generally more cost-effective—for both individuals and society—than our current remedial approach. Prevention means getting health exams on a regular basis, before problems develop. But having a colonoscopy or mammogram is an ordeal. Even a cholesterol