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Moving forward with echoes from the past

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MOVING FORWARD WITH ECHOES FROM THE PAST

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A company's history can build a corporate identity and branding, as well as overcome a crisis

Managers are typically under pressure to accomplish goals, keep up with the latest news and technologies, as well as plan for the next steps of survival and growth in their organisations. While such a forward-looking attitude may be needed for progress, few would slow their pace to ponder over what they did yesterday that might be fruitful today and tomorrow, let alone to appreciate the history, culture and heritage of their companies.

“When most people talk about history, they think about how to represent the past. Our work accepted on face value what people inside the organisations said was their history. Sometimes history would be the founder’s story, repeated over time, which became institutionalised later on a website or in a corporate biography,” says **Dr Mary Jo Hatch**, Professor Emerita, University of Virginia.

“History can also take the form of cultural artefacts and symbols that are invoked from time to time and that may be found, for example, in corporate archives or museums.

“We are looking at something with an echo of the past. I tend to take a hermeneutic point of view on history. The past can be dragged into the present and used in the future because symbols as material objects with meanings always carry a trace of what was left behind as they move through time.”

HISTORY: THE WAY FORWARD

In the case of Danish brewery Carlsberg, she said a team of master brewers named a line of hand crafted beer they were experimenting with *Semper Ardens*, which means “always burning” in Latin. These words were carved out of the wall above the entrance to Carlsberg’s headquarters building by the founder’s son, Carl Jacobsen, a hundred years before they were used to name the beer.

"Historical artefacts have that capacity to lead you backwards in time as you make decisions and take actions that will affect the future."

"There was a strong emotional response from those present when Semper Ardens was suggested as the name of the new beer. One of the master brewers noticed the motto while talking a walk as he was thinking about a name for the beer.

"He came back with the proposal and everyone instantly recognised that the motto was the right name for the beer. They responded as if they had known it already, which was what I meant when I say it was an echo of the past," says Dr Hatch, who has spent five years studying the culture, history and the organisation of Carlsberg Group in its headquarters and another five in its subsidiaries in Denmark, France, Malaysia, Russia and the UK.

"The phrase may have lain dormant for more than one hundred years but the meaning that travelled along with Semper Ardens contained a kernel of meaning that exploded in that moment or recognition with great resonance.

"It was a process of recognising something that holds such deep cultural significance that the brew masters knew it even if they did not know where it came from. You might say they reacted because they were familiar with the phrase after seeing it many times over a doorway they used, but they had no active memory of having seen it, showing surprise when the carving was pointed out to them.

"It is this subconscious or tacit power that echoes of the past can have that makes history such an important topic for those who are interested in organisations and their management. Historical artefacts have that capacity to lead you backwards in time as you make decisions and take actions that will affect the future. So you go back in order to go forward."

IMPACT OF LEGO GROUP'S MUSEUM ON NEW CEO

For managers wanting to incorporate the company's heritage into their everyday work, Dr Hatch says they should begin with learning the history of the company by reading the historical records and from staff who have been with the organization a long time and know its stories.

"If there is an archivist or a historian in the company, they can help you revisit the past. A visit to the corporate museum will introduce some of the organisation's artefacts and provide insight to understand the company's heritage," she says.

"When I was working with Danish company Lego Group, my colleagues and I learnt that the new CEO, then just 33 years old and a micro economist hired to save the company from its dire economic situation, was busy containing costs and downsizing.

"Looking for quick ways to save he thought to get rid of the corporate museum – housed in the founder's original workshop – when one of his employees urged him to visit the place before shutting it down.

"He visited the museum and a couple of hours later returned to his office with a hand-carved wooden sign. The founder began LEGO, which translates as "play well" by making wooden toys and the sign the new CEO held under his arm, translated from Danish, said 'Only the best is good enough'. He immediately hung the sign over his desk and said, 'We are keeping the museum.'

"So this story about LEGO shows the power of history. Your views can change in a minute when you come into contact with this emotionally and aesthetically powerful force. And once you recognise the value of history, you have new possibilities for imagining and communicating strategic vision for the future."

BUILDING CORPORATE IDENTITY

With the company's history, managers can strengthen the sense of belonging employees share, and if it is used to define the corporate identity, they will be more likely to give that identity an authentic foundation in the organisation's culture.

"If you look at cultural anthropology, much of what interested early researchers was the collective sense cultures or tribes had of themselves. Tribal members often explained their collective identity and who they were by telling their tribe's origin story. History allows us to start making a case for cultural-rooted collective identity that I believe still explains much today, though now we call our tribes organisations.

"If you connect to other people in your organisation through their sense of history, you are going to be better able to motivate people and explain new strategies and ambitions for the organisation by using terms and drawing on key symbols from the past. You will be learning and using language and emotional aesthetics that have significance for those you wish to lead, and this will give you cultural authority."

To realise meaningful outcomes in business decisions, managers should take a step back from the daily demands and appreciate what the company meant to its founders and stakeholders. A symbol or a saying, perhaps a story told by a long serving member of staff can invoke memories and meaning that will inspire employees, managers and leaders who will then see that they continue work that has been in progress since the beginning – and to pass this legacy to future generations.