
Using History to Motivate Change



By [Henrich Greve](#) , INSEAD Professor of Entrepreneurship

Creative and entrepreneurial employees thrive on a sense of the organisational past.

How to change an organisation? The answer to this question is made surprisingly difficult by those who think that change is unnecessary, change is risky, and in any case it should be change exactly as they want it; nothing else will do. Using organisational history to promote a change effort is an old trick that makes a lot of sense, because it is a way of claiming that change is actually a return to a golden age. And history can be edited in many ways; managers use this trick of repurposing organisational history.

But can it be more than a managerial trick to manipulate the organisation? [New research by Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz in *Administrative Science Quarterly*](#) shows how change can be created in a more entrepreneurial fashion. The research follows two distinct and independent occasions that Carlsberg brewery used its old motto, the Latin phrase *Semper Ardens* (“always burning”), to foster change.

In the first instance from the late 1990s, a group of master brewers used the motto to formulate, gain acceptance for and launch a craft beer line, in stark contrast to the industrial beer that was the core of Carlsberg at the time.

Approximately ten years later, external consultants from the firm BrightHouse resurrected *Semper Ardens* to create a unifying statement for Carlsberg Group which had become large and diverse through recent mergers.

Five steps

To all appearances, the two projects could hardly have been more different, yet they followed a remarkably similar progression, which the researchers describe in five steps (the paper dubs them “five micro-processes of historicizing”).

- **Rediscovering** – At first, the brewers hit upon *Semper Ardens* as a cool-sounding name for their proposed beer, having seen it on a stone carving above the door of the Carlsberg laboratory in Copenhagen (formerly the company headquarters) where they held weekly beer-tasting sessions. In 2009, the BrightHouse consultants learned of the phrase through interviews with master brewers. Both sets of actors gravitated to, as one master brewer put it, the “powerful mysterious phrase” because it seemed infused with the historical authenticity required to legitimise their intended change projects.

- **Recontextualising** – The mysteriousness of *Semper Ardens* was a source of utility as well as fascination. The phrase’s meaning was somewhat flexible depending on the user’s purposes. The master brewers – well aware that some at Carlsberg objected to entering the unfamiliar microbrew market – employed *Semper Ardens* to evoke the artisanal practices of the “old brewer” on which the company was founded. Using the old slogan allowed them to position a strategic shift as a reconnection with roots. For the BrightHouse consultants, *Semper Ardens* stood for “burning passion”, something intangible to bind together the various companies – each with its own history and cultural background – that comprise the Carlsberg Group in the 21st century.

- **Reclaiming** – Rather than using the slogan as historical window dressing, both brewers and consultants felt the need to dig deeper into the company’s history to solidify links to the past. Rooting in the Carlsberg archives, the brewers traced the slogan’s lineage all the way back to an encounter between company founder Carl Jacobsen and French sculptor Henri Chapu. “*Semper Ardens*” was the name of Chapu’s artists’ group from his student days at Ecole de Rome, Italy. In addition, the rediscovery of old recipes in the archive influenced them in developing the flavour of *Semper Ardens* Beer.

The BrightHouse consultants took inspiration not only from Carlsberg's discovery of "clean yeast" in the 1880s but also from Jacobsen's decision to share specimens of purified yeast culture with competitors so the public would no longer have to be exposed to possibly contaminated beer.

- **Renewing** – This is a very important step when history is used to motivate change, because the new activities are never exact equivalents of the historical record. To bring legacy to life as well as to emphasise indebtedness to the past, both brewers and consultants paid special attention to the intersection of history and modernity. Every bottle of *Semper Ardens* Beer came with a mini-pamphlet that told the whole story behind the name, even identifying the present-day Carlsberg master brewers. Each variety of the beer was launched at a special luncheon for connoisseurs and enthusiasts catered by a top chef. After in-depth discussions, the consultants settled on the phrase "Thirst for Great" as a sort of non-literal translation elevating *Semper Ardens* from a slogan to a defining, unifying principle for the entire organisation. The two phrases appeared together in external and internal communications material ranging from a promotional video to large glossy posters and intranet websites.

- **Re-embedding** – The master brewer team were able to embed *Semper Ardens* into the organisation so that it lived on in a new craft brewery project even after the beer using it as a label was discontinued, and as a marker of distinction used when announcing extraordinary team efforts or noteworthy events. Similarly, the communications campaign launched by BrightHouse ignited team spirit and creativity across Carlsberg's global subsidiaries. For example, Carlsberg Malaysia made its own video substituting local symbols for the Danish-themed brand iconography. Thus the motto lived on in its renewed form of encouraging a passion for improvement at Carlsberg.

Flexibility for the future

Of late, the researchers report, *Semper Ardens* seems to be falling back into disuse. This fits with their broader conclusion that re-engagement with organisational history is followed by an interval of amnesia. But the historical narrative is inevitably picked up again when change agents – such as the master brewers and consultants – require it to claim legitimacy or persuade audiences. Firms with a wealth of history should take pains to preserve it, for their future may depend on doing so.

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