

Stuck in the past? How to integrate different views of history in your organisation

Written by

[Christian Hampel](#), [Elena Dalpiaz](#)

Published

2 May 2023

Category

[Management](#)

Key topics

[Management](#)

How can organisations deal with conflicting views of their history among their employees? Dr Christian Hampel and Dr Elena Dalpiaz explain how a fintech company resolved its identity crisis and moved on with confidence

Our identities as individuals and groups are shaped by our past experiences and memories. But what happens when we disagree about our past? How can we understand who we are when we can't agree on who we were?

This is a common challenge for societies and organisations that face polarisation and conflict over their history. For example, the Brexit debate in the UK was partly driven by different interpretations of how the country had been connected to the EU and

whether that was good or bad.

The case of DigiCo: a fintech company with a divided past

Similarly, organisations can suffer when their employees have divergent views of their past. A case in point is [a leading British bank](#): its employees disagree about whether its struggles during the great financial crisis were primarily due to the problematic behaviour of its traders or due to the high turnover among leaders. Such disagreements can create a dilemma.

We studied this problem in a European fintech company that we call DigiCo (not its real name). The company was losing its employees' commitment because they were split between two opposite views of its past: some thought DigiCo had a shameful past of irresponsible behaviour that would always haunt it, while others thought DigiCo had a glorious past of innovation that would never be matched again.

Temporal synergising: a way to reconcile different views of the past

How can organisations overcome this deadlock and restore their sense of identity?

Our new study in the [Academy of Management Journal](#) shows how by using a process called "temporal synergising", managers can combine different views of the past in a way that supports the core values and goals of the organisation, rather than ignoring or dismissing them.

DigiCo managed to reconcile its employees by showing how its past innovation and recklessness had both contributed to making the company more efficient and customer focused. This helped to create a shared vision and identity among the employees, allowing DigiCo to focus on its future again.

Ignoring polarised views about the past may seem like an easy solution, but doing so risks letting the problem grow over time. Our research shows organisations can benefit from finding and using common ground between different perspectives on their history. This can help them create a shared identity and get back to deciding who they want to be.

This article draws on findings from “[Confronting the Contested Past: Sensemaking and Rhetorical History in the Reconstruction of Organizational Identity](#)” by Christian E. Hampel (Imperial London) and Elena Dalpiaz (USI Lugano, Imperial London).

Written by

[Christian Hampel](#), [Elena Dalpiaz](#)

Published

2 May 2023

Category

[Management](#)

Key topics

[Management](#)

Main image: serggn / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images.

Share



About Christian Hampel

Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship & Social Innovation

Dr Christian Hampel is Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship & Social Innovation at Imperial Business School. Prior to joining Imperial, he completed his PhD in Management at the University of Cambridge’s Judge Business School and was a Research Fellow (postdoctoral researcher) at the Centre for Corporate Reputation at the University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School.

Read [Christian's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

About Elena Dalpiaz

Associate Professor of Strategy

Dr Elena Dalpiaz was an Associate Professor of Strategy at Imperial Business School until the academic year 2024-25. She holds a PhD degree from Bocconi University, where she also earned her BA in Economics and Law (with honours). During 2007 and 2008, she was a visiting scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, McCombs Business School.

Read [Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

Monthly newsletter

Receive the latest insights from Imperial Business School

[Sign up now](#)

Your company's history is a proprietary resource

Corporate stories must be curated and nurtured – they're a valuable asset for the future

[Read more](#)