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ARTICLE **LEADERSHIP**

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Steve Jobs is [back in the headlines](#), which got me thinking about this unique leader's legacy — and what, if anything, the rest of us can learn from how Jobs does his job. Whoever uttered the words, “trust the art, not the artist” must have had Steve Jobs in mind. There's no doubt that the Apple CEO will go down as one of the most creative, visionary, and high-impact leaders of his generation — or any generation. How many corporate executives can make a legitimate claim to have reshaped not just one industry but four: computing (the Mac), music (the iPod), mobile communications (the iPhone), and movies (Pixar). And how many CEOs can make the legitimate claim that they achieved their wealth and power by making tens of millions of people so unbelievably happy that they worship the company and its products with near-religious devotion?

So in terms of the impact his products have had on the world, Steve Jobs represents the face of business at its best. And yet, in terms of his approach to leadership, Jobs represents the face of business — well, if not at its worst, then certainly not as something worth emulating. It's not so much the secrecy about his liver transplant or the controversies over backdated stock options. Those are matters of corporate governance and investor relations, which, while important, aren't all that urgent. To me, the issue is more Jobs's approach to leadership itself — which, despite the compelling and cutting-edge quality of his products, is strangely unappetizing and often downright retro.

Jobs, for all of his virtues, clings to the Great Man Theory of Leadership — a CEO-centric model of executive power that is outmoded, unsustainable, and, for most of us mere mortals, ineffective in a world of non-stop change. A *Wired* magazine [cover story from last year made the point well](#). The article begins with a memorable anecdote — the CEO, in search of a space in the company's crowded parking lot, regularly leaves his Mercedes in a handicapped space, sometimes taking up two spaces.

The pattern became so noticeable that employees, according to the article, put notes on his windshield that read, Park Different.

“Jobs’ fabled attitude toward parking”, writer Leander Kahney says, “reflects his approach to business: For him, the regular rules do not apply.” That means shrouding his company in secrecy; treating his employees to tyrannical outbursts; and refusing basic accommodations that would make beautifully designed products more customer-friendly. (As one wise-guy blogger commented, in decidedly bad taste: “I can’t believe Steve Jobs’s liver is replaceable but the battery in my iPhone is not.”)

We’ve all seen the “smartest-guy-in-the-room” syndrome — and how horribly it has worked in so many different settings. It wasn’t all that long ago that most everyone in business assumed that if you were in charge, you needed to have all the answers. When it came to generating ideas, if you were the CEO, or the head of a business unit, or the leader of a team, you were, by definition, “the smartest person in the room.”

That was the sign of true ambition — absolute confidence in your infallibility as a leader. Over time, though, it has become a warning sign of failure — whether from bad judgment, low morale from disillusioned troops, or sheer burnout. The best leaders I know don’t want the job of thinking for everybody else. They understand that if they can tap the hidden genius inside the organization, and the collective genius outside the organization, they will create ideas that will be much more powerful than what even the smartest individual leader could ever come up with on his or her own. Nobody alone is as smart as everybody together.

Leaders who want to both change the game and stay in the game for the long haul have come to appreciate the power of “humbition” over blind ambition. What’s humbition? [It’s a term I first heard from Jane Harper](#), a nearly 30-year veteran of IBM. It is, she explains, the subtle blend of humility and ambition that drives the most successful leaders — an antidote to the know-it-all hubris that affects so many executives and entrepreneurs.

Humility is not part of the Steve Jobs leadership repertoire — and that’s worked out fine for him. But humility has become a crucial part of the job description for leaders who aren’t Steve Jobs. So marvel at his products, applaud his feel for design, wonder at his capacity to cast such a large shadow over so many industries — and, by all means, pray for his speedy recovery and long health.

But don’t think you’ll do better as a leader by acting more like Apple’s leader. Trust the art, not the artist.

Bill Taylor is the cofounder of *Fast Company* and the author, most recently, of [Simply Brilliant: How Great Organizations Do Ordinary Things in Extraordinary Ways](#). Learn more at williamctaylor.com.

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