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# Dark Shirts and Symbolic Management

By [Henrich Greve](#)

**One of the most recent news stories on Apple features a picture of CEO Tim Cook addressing an audience dressed in a dark shirt. It made me look twice because I initially thought he was wearing the same kind of turtleneck sweater made famous by Steve Jobs (and designed by Issey Miyake).**

Now, I don't know Mr. Cook's personal tastes in clothing, but I became curious enough to do a picture search on his name. He indeed appears in a dark shirt (not black) in most of them, but in some he has a pale blue shirt. Interestingly, the pictures marked as most recent in my search were all dark, but some of the older ones, including the one on his official apple.com profile, were pale blue.

Do short colours matter at all, or for that matter, turtlenecks? It depends on your theory of leadership. If you think that leaders only act on real decisions, then wearing a shirt is probably important but the colour is extraneous. In such a view of leadership, what leaders do is collect information, make plans and decisions, make incentives for subordinates to execute the plans and evaluate and select those subordinates. Those are actions that characterize the "hands-on" leader, and we value such leaders for their understanding of the firm and attention to detail (as long as things go well, of course).

But at the same time the model of hands-on leadership seems a bit impossible, or at least incomplete, in large and complex firms. How can the leader really get necessary and correct information? How does the leader know which decisions to handle personally and which to delegate? How does the leader know that incentives don't go awry? How does the leader combine attention to a broad set of issues with in-depth evaluation of subordinates in order to choose the best? We may have leaders who can do some or all of these tasks, but we can see how it may help a leader to choose a few simple actions with effects throughout the organization.

Such actions are what symbolic management is about. Some people find meaning in their work and the organization they work for; many more might do so if they were provided with a meaningful description of it. That is where leaders well-versed in symbolic management can provide shared meanings for members of the organization to interpret the world and their role in it, and shared goals based on these meanings. Many meanings are possible, depending on the organization, and they can be communicated through the language and actions of leaders – or even their clothes. Such actions are comparatively easy as long as the leader remembers that shared meanings fall apart whenever inconsistencies appear.

Apple is described as having a strong corporate culture because their employees do share a broad range of meanings and interpretations of the world, as well as goals – most notable in the supremacy of their own vision in making R&D decisions, with outcomes that are never boring (think of the Newton, and the iPhone). Steve Jobs was the source of these shared meanings and the goals that went along with them, and his passing away must have led to considerable uncertainty about the future of the culture. As his successor, Tim Cook has the unenviable task of trying to convince his employees that the culture will remain even after its charismatic leader, a task made especially difficult because Apple did not do well after Steve Jobs's first departure.

It is hard to tell for sure, but Tim Cook's sartorial choice may be a deliberate way of showing continuity in Apple's leadership without trying to mimic Steve Jobs completely – a good choice, because it is well known that he is quite different kind of leader. If it is, he has found a simple and effective piece of symbolic management. Kudos to him for that, and for not making sure the shirt is not completely black – many Europeans will have issues with leaders in black shirts.

#### Reference

Pfeffer, J. 1981. Management as symbolic action: The creation and maintenance of organizational paradigms. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 3 1-52.

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